

## How to Save A Hero

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### Relationships:

Bakugou Katsuki/Uraraka Ochako, Midoriya Izuku/Todoroki Shouto, Jirou Kyouka/Yaoyorozu Momo

### Characters:

Bakugou Katsuki, Uraraka Ochako, Midoriya Izuku, Todoroki Shouto, Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead, Tokoyami Fumikage, Ojiro Mashirao, Yaoyorozu Momo, Jirou Kyouka, Yagi Toshinori | All Might

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# How to Save A Hero

by [KacchakoFan2171](#)

## Summary

Ochako Uraraka has plans to grow and thrive her second year at UA, but when an emergency rescue mission lands her in the middle of a brutal human trafficking rink, wherein quirked individuals are pitted against each other in violent fights to the death for entertainment, she finds herself questioning her strength, her character, and even her ability to be a real hero.

## Notes

Okay, so I don't expect that this story will be for everybody- but it's mainly for me- essentially the essence of fanfiction as therapy- in fact, it has been encouraged by my therapist (sorry if that's too much info) to explore some of my own PTSD through my comfort character, Ochako. Long story short I'm processing, for the first time, a series of sexual assaults in my life, through a character I would have seen myself in as a teen, a version of me I miss- and walking her through a healing process helps me.

So, please, mind the tags. And while the rape/assault will be implied (and there will be no graphic descriptions), the impact and PTSD will be descriptive. So please don't read if that is triggering/unhelpful for you.

And while this is a Kacchako fanfic, it's Ochako centric, with my comfort characters coming around her to create a community I wish I had.

Additionally, while some of the interactions with her therapist are from some of my own therapy, PLEASE, no one take anything in here as "therapy/advice." I'm still trying to create a good story, so there will be ups and downs and stumbles- and while I'm using this for a healing/externalizing exercise, it is not to be instructional in any way.

# Usually

Ochako was not the most powerful student at UA. She wasn't the fastest or even the smartest, and she didn't lose sleep over any of those facts. She wanted to do well; to get better, to become the best hero she possibly could, to be better today than she was yesterday. But the number one spot was not her dream.

It never had been.

Her dream was for her family, to give them a life without worry as much as it was in her power to do that.

But despite all of this, despite not being the fastest or the strongest- Ochako was often the first to notice when something was off- when the dynamic of a room had shifted slightly. So, as she boarded the bus, she was the first to notice that someone was missing.

Aizawa, in a rare moment of indulgence, had allowed them to take a short break on their way back to UA from summer training camp. They had done well, though he didn't say it (he rarely did), so he indulged them and stopped for dinner and a break to stretch their legs at an outdoor market, bustling with energy, food, and colorful shops. But they had been under strict instructions to return to the bus by 7:30 pm.

It was 7:38.

And Tsu was rarely tardy.

Ochako surveyed the bus one more time from where she stood at the front, then back down the short line of students behind her.

"Move it, Cheeks!"

She scrunched up her nose at Bakugo, who was standing behind her, gaze shifted slightly to the left, hands shoved into his pockets. She stepped out of the way into the empty seat in front of Aizawa so that the cranky blonde could pass her.

"Sensei," she said, looking around. He grunted in response, letting her know that despite his sleepy gaze, he heard her. "Tsu isn't here." She spoke quickly, not wanting to waste his time. Despite being someone she explicitly trusted, Aizawa always felt intimidating to her and made

her bumble her words, no matter how simple.

Aizawa looked up and then behind him. He knew what Ochako knew about Tsu as well, that she was not a problem child- that she was trust-worthy and always on time.

“Should I go and check on her? Maybe her phone died or something?”

“Yes,” he said. “Go ahead.” Ochako nodded and hurried off of the bus- her legs still a bit shaky from the long weekend of training. Her body was still recovering from the intense training. It had been a hell of a way to start off her second year and she was excited to continue to expand on her quirk control and her weight tolerance.

But her body was not thanking her for it yet as she hurried toward the bathroom. It was crowded with people. She smiled apologetically at a few of them as she jumped the line, hurriedly explaining that she was just looking for someone.

“Tsu,” she called out, bending over to check out the shoes- looking for Tsu’s distinct feet and her green shoes. “Tsu!”

Nothing. Ochako lingered a bit longer outside the the restroom before moving on. She looked down at her phone to see if she had missed any calls or text messages from Tsu; nothing.

Maybe she had already made it back to the bus?

She brushed her fingers against her own arm, eliminating her own gravity and pushed gently off the ground, grabbing hold to one of the poles of the nearest booth. She used the height to scan the crowds for her amphibious friend.

But still nothing. The sky was beginning to darken, and the booths and shops were lighting up, creating a faint glow that made it even harder to make out the faces of those passing by. She pushed herself weightlessly along the top of the booths. And then, just beyond the market, in the open field behind it, she caught sight of some odd movement. Nothing she could make out from this distance but enough to arouse suspicion. She hopped across the top of the booths, and trees bringing herself to the edge of the market.

She wasn’t the strongest or the smartest, but she had good instincts. So she moved closer to the anomaly. If it was nothing- then it wouldn’t matter, but it wasn’t worth the risk. But the closer she got the more the scene was illuminated by the cool evening glow.

The closer she got the more panicked she became. She saw her, Tsu, flat on the ground behind the van, held down by two men; though she didn't look like she was putting up much of a fight. Which was already strange.

"Release," she whispered, landing a distance away from her. Tsu was awake, she could see that, weakly trying to pull away from her captors, her head lulling back and forth.

"A whole fucking bus of kids," she heard one of the men say as he opened the back of the van.

"Quirked children, never know which ones are gonna be dangerous," said another. "And you're lucky we got a cute one. There were some real stinkers in that group."

Ochako squatted low to the ground as they heaved Tsu onto her feet. She groaned in protest, and one of the men chuckled cruelly. They were moving her toward the van.

Shit. She needed to do something fast.

"Well, what do we have here..."

As soon as she felt the hand on her shoulder, Ochako grabbed hold of the bony wrist and threw her attacker viciously into the ground before activating her quirk on the man and throwing him as hard as she could into the van, returning his gravity as he collided with it.

"What the hell?"

She dodged as an electrified pike wooshed past her shoulder, missing the back of her neck.

"Ochako..." came Tsu's garbled voice. "Don't let them..."

Ochako side-stepped another attacker, who had a syringe at the ready to pierce her skin.

"Tsu!" she called, running toward her friend as the two men attempted to shove her into the back of the van hurriedly.

"They took my quirk," Tsu said, voice thick and garbled.

Ochako heard a violent thud as Tsu was thrown into the back of the van. Ochako had to hurry. She wouldn't let them take her. She would be a hero. She would save Tsu. She got to the opening of the van and

reached out a hand.

“Tsu,” she screamed. “Tongue!”

If they had taken Tsu’s quirk in a similar way as Aizawa did, then she probably couldn’t jump or poison them, but...maybe she still had her tongue.

Tsu’s tongue flew from her mouth and out of the van just into Ochako’s outstretched hand, while Ochako pressed her other hand into the door of the van, floating all of them upward and, she hoped, away from their attempted captors. Tsu was floating to the top of the van, boneless and weak but alive.

“Tsu,” she called out. “Can you walk?” She pulled Tsu to her, tugging gently on her tongue until the girl collapsed against her

“Yeah,” she croaked. “I think so...”

“Okay,” said Ochako. “We’re going to get you out of here, okay?” That was the priority, without her quirk and drugged as she seemed to be, Tsu was vulnerable. Ochako looked out at the horizon from where she stood in the floating van. “I just need you to trust me.” The girl moaned by way of answer, and Ochako grabbed her by the arm and, trusting her gut, her instinct, she tossed Tsu far and hard toward the market. She prepared her hands, pressing her pads together slowly, focusing as she incrementally lowered Tsu. Not too fast- she didn’t want to hurt her, but this was still a new skill and one that she hadn’t fully mastered.

The van slammed onto the ground suddenly, sending Ochako flinging forward and Tsu falling in the distance. Luckily, Tsu was already close to the ground at least, as she landed atop one of the booths and rolled off. She would be okay. Ochako moved to activate her quirk on herself so she could leap after her.

She could do this.

She could be a hero. The best hero that she could be. She could save everyone. She prepared to jump, angling herself so she didn’t go straight up but she barely made it off the ground before she felt the harsh grip of a hand on her ankle, jerking her back downward, painfully wrenching her knee. Then she felt the prick of a needle into her thigh.

The sensation was...terrifying. Something like when Aizawa erased

their quirks, but also something completely different. Perhaps it was the knowledge that when Aizawa did it, it was temporary. Suddenly she felt like she had lost a limb, or a part of her brain was turned off entirely.

She was tossed into the back of the van and hurriedly secured by rough, angry hands. She tried to fight back but her body felt like it had been pumped full of thick tar, weighing her down.

Then she felt the harsh strike of an electric current go through her body.

She hadn't been fast enough.

It hadn't been enough.

She heard the faint sound of a door slamming shut, and then all she knew was darkness.

###

Shouta was just about to stand and dismount the bus when Midoriya approached him.

"Sensei," he said. "Do you...Tsu and Uraraka have been gone a while, maybe we should..."

Shouta rolled his eyes at the grumbling that was beginning to rise from the tired and impatient adolescents behind him, ready to get going and get to bed.

But Midoriya was right- both Uraraka and Asui were still unaccounted for. He stood the rest of the way and moved to get off the bus when heard Midoriya gasp.

"Tsu!"

Shouta looked out at the stretch of grass between the market and the bus to see Asui running, or attempting to run, toward them. She stumbled and shakily got back to her feet only to fall again, as though she were drunk.

Unlikely.

He could hear the sound of the students moving on the bus to get a better look- concerned questions and worried muttering replaced the previous grumbling. Shouta hurried off the bus, closely followed by

Midoriya. He didn't waste time to scold the boy who still didn't know when to stay put.

Asui's eyes fell on them and she let herself fall to her knees, jerky and awkward, like a broken doll. Shouta fell beside her while Midoriya gathered the girl against him, helping her to prop herself up.

"Tsu," he said. "What...?"

"Ochako," she groaned, slipping in and out of consciousness. "She... they took our quirks...help her...someone has to help her..."

Shouta was up on his feet in a flash. "Stay with her, Midoriya," he ordered, not bothering to look over his shoulder. Normally he would worry about Midoriya following him, but right now another friend needed his help, and Shouta trusted him to stay put this time.

But he did see the conflict in the boy's eyes as he turned to run back toward the market, a sinking feeling in his stomach. He felt like he was always running to keep up with this class- running to keep them safe, striving to protect them even as they became heroes.

Usually, he gets there in time.

Usually.

###

Ochako stirred awake with a cold, violent start; breathless and aching, and deeply confused. She was in...she blinked into the dark trying to focus through the splitting sensation in the back of her head. She reached up and pressed her fingers to a thin strip of scalp where her hair had been cut, finding an incision there.

She sat up and her whole body protested against the movement. She blinked furiously into the dark to see that there were bars around her. She was in...a...a...a prison? A cage? Big enough for her to sit up in. She reached up and felt the concrete slab above her head and then the bars on all sides; thick and cold.

"Careful..."

She turned around quickly at the voice and felt immediately dizzy and sick.



“Who...who are you?” she spat into the darkness. Her bleary vision cleared slightly and through her own bars, she saw another cage, not far from hers, holding a boy, maybe a year or two older than her. He was looking at her, not unkind, but sad, almost apologetic.

She grasped the bars and leaned into them to get closer.

“Where am I?”

The boy shrugged. She closed her eyes and look at him again- this time making out the blue fur in place of skin.

“I don’t know,” he said. “We call it the warehouse...but...” he shrugged. “We aren’t sure.”

She licked her lips, finding them dry and cracked and bleeding. How long had she been out?

“It’s okay,” she breathed to herself and pressed her forehead to the bars. “It’s okay. They’ll- they’ll be looking for me. They’ll come for us.”

The boy scoffed quietly.

“I’ve been here a while,” he said. “And we don’t even know where here is, what makes you think anyone out there will?”

“You’re not from Japan?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Nope. Russia.”

A loud sshh came from somewhere in the warehouse; letting her know there were even more people than just the two of them. She quieted her voice to a whisper.

“Okay,” she said. “It’s...it’s okay.” She smiled, like All-Might, like Deku, hoping to reassure him (to reassure herself). “I’m a hero. So I’ll figure a way out of here.” She swallowed back any doubt and nodded again. “I promise.”

The boy looked at her for a moment. She hoped if she smiled it would assure him, the way it always did her when Deku did. But his face didn’t change; it remained fixed in some mix of broken pity and that felt like a drop of cold water down her back.

“I’m Li,” he said finally.

“I’m Ochako.”

He nodded and exhaled slowly. “Just some advice,” he said. “Don’t fight them when they come for you.”

Ochako opened her mouth to interrupt but he shook his head. “They usually wait a couple of days before your first fight.” Fight? What the hell did he mean? “But when they do come, don’t resist them.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m a hero. I...I can save us- I promise.”

Li sighed and leaned his head back against the bars before sinking down into his pillow. Ochako waited for a moment for him to continue but she sat in a dense silence. No words were offered, no sign that he believed her.

She would save them, she purposed.

She would. No matter what. She lay down on her own pillow adjusting on the cold, hard ground, wondering how anyone could possibly fall asleep as her body shivered violently under a thin blanket.

She was about to close her eyes, to try and sleep. She had no idea where she was; no quirk (for now); and her head was still throbbing. She was useless right now. She was about to fall asleep when she heard the slightest whisper from Li’s cell.

“I’m so sorry you’re here, Ochako,” he said. “I really am.”

And there was something so frightening in his voice, something so unfamiliar to her that she could hardly place it. But she could; some part of her recognized it and it terrified her.

It was despair.

###

Shouta waited outside the infirmary while Chief Tsuragamae and Detective Tsukauchi finished speaking with Asui.

The poor girl had been shaken, though largely unharmed, and was not alert enough after whatever suppressant they had given her emptied itself from her system. She had given descriptions of her assailants-

detailed enough considering her training had taught her to look for those distinctive features. But as detailed as her descriptions were, they were still generic enough to describe a bulk of the world's population.

He raised a hand and rubbed it over his face as he leaned heavily against the wall, looking up abruptly at the sound of approaching footsteps- a familiar gait at this point.

"Aizawa..."

"All-Might," he returned, strained.

"I told you to call me Toshinori, didn't I?"

"Must have forgotten."

The retired hero didn't respond and Shouta didn't care. "Is Detective Tsukauchi with young Asui?" He nodded, staring down at the grimy, tiled floor that looked like it needed a good waxing.

"Does she have any clues as to where they could have taken Uraraka?"

"Doubtful," he said. He had not been there for the whole of the interview, having stepped away to make a phone call, but he had heard enough. White van- unmarked. Three men- maybe four- brown hair, brown eyes, medium build, white shirts.

All-Might- Toshinori- stood beside him in silence, and Shouta could feel his emotional gaze, so weighted with his feelings.

"What?" snapped Shouta, frustrated and frayed with exhaustion and anger.

"This isn't your fault, Shouta," he said. Shouta scoffed as he peeled himself from the wall outside the infirmary like dry paint.

"No one asked," he answered.

"All the same," continued Toshinori. "You're a fine educator and..."

"Apparently not," he said, colder than he meant to be. This wasn't Toshinori's fault, he knew that. "I can't even teach these idiot children not to run headfirst into every disastrous situation."

Toshinori's eyes crinkled at the corners, shining with familiar emotion- the man never did have issues showing what he was feeling.

“And if she hadn’t run into the danger,” he said. “If she had stayed put, you would still be missing a student.”

He was right of course, from what Asui had shared, she was almost loaded into the van when Uraraka intervened. Either way, one would have been lost, and that didn’t make him feel any better.

“There are only a few jobs as difficult as being a hero,” Toshinori said. Shouta averted his gaze, unwilling to take the bait- which he knew, of course, would not make a difference. “And one of those is teaching heroes. We train them and mold them and ask them to be brave, and good, and run *toward* instead of *away*.”

Shouta had heard this before- of course- several times in fact, but all the same, Toshinori continued. “All that work only to make us sick with worry, even angry, when they do exactly what we taught them to do.”

Shouta breathed in and then out- trying to calm those unmoored feelings in his chest.

“Did Nezu contact the girl’s parents?” he asked abruptly, changing the subject.

“Yes,” said All-Might. “And assured them that we are already moving to find her.”

Aizawa nodded again, and blinked furiously, moistening his dry eyes.

“But,” Toshinori continued. “Your students are waiting to hear from you.”

“Of course they are,” he said. They were all so...connected. It wasn’t odd, not really. When you faced death regularly, it tended to bond a group, but in so many ways, Class 2-A was different. “I’ll go update them.”

He walked slowly away from the infirmary, every step feeling heavier than the next; like he was about to break through the floor, weighed down with his own worry, his own uncertainty, his own failures. He opened the door to find the whole of the class waiting outside. And they would feel the weight of those failures so strongly.

How had this happened again?

How had he failed them again?

“Is Asui okay?” asked Yaoyorozu first. They waited quietly for him to answer.

“Yes,” he said. “She’s fine and will make a full recovery.”

There was one exhale of relief, but there was no celebration.

“And Ochako?” pressed Midoriya, who had yet to actually cry. “Did you find her yet?”

“We are working on it,” he said. “Detectives are speaking to Asui right now, and others are on the scene of the abduction.”

He waited, letting the disappointment fall on the students, letting them process the news. After a few moments, he continued. “We are putting forth every available effort to find Uraraka but...” he paused and looked out over them glaring. “The people who took her have quirk canceling capabilities, so no unauthorized rescue missions.” His eyes settled on Midoriya, not so subtly. The boy clenched his fists and his jaw jumped as his teeth ground together.

But all the same- Midoriya nodded. He was growing.

“Now, everyone get back to your dorms,” he said. “It’s been a long day and second-year is essential to your progress as heroes. So don’t get started on the wrong foot.”

They nodded and slowly filed out in hushed clusters. When they were gone, he turned and made his way back to the infirmary. They needed to rest, but for him, there was no time to waste. He had to act fast. If Uraraka didn’t have her quirk then...he couldn’t imagine what kind of danger she was in.

# What Mercy Looks Like

## Chapter Notes

\*TW

This is the only chapter where the actual shit happens; most of the story deals with the aftermath, PTSD, and the long hard process of healing. I wanted that to be my focus, but I also wanted a full story, so feel free to skip to the end if you want a brief description of what happened. But this is where it happens. There is death, reference to an assault (it won't ever be explicitly described in this fic), and degrading words from a villain (many actual words that i had said to me).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When they came for her- as Li told her they would- Ochako did not take his advice- despite his repeated warnings.

“You don’t have a quirk,” he reminded her. “Not right now.”

He couldn’t tell her how or why, he could do nothing but offer his best guesses about how they controlled the time and place they could use their quirks, but his major point- over and over again- was, “You have no way to defend yourself right now.” Not to mention that the put something in her head like a shock collar- at least that’s what Li told her it was. She had yet to feel it go off, but Li assured her that she did not want to.

All the same, she fought when they came for her. Because she was a hero and she didn’t know how to do anything else besides that- she didn’t know how to let herself get taken without trying, especially when she knew where they were taking her. She knew what would happen and there was no way in hell that she would go quietly.

And she believed- somewhere in some hopelessly deluded part of herself- that she could take the pain (it was basically Kaminari’s quirk after all), that she would feel the pain and push it down until she did what she had to do.

She was humbled immediately.

She had not been prepared at all for how completely crippling the pain of an electric shock going through her body was, and it came

quickly after she threw herself forward, out of the cage, and head-butted the man who came to get her.

She did experience a brief surge of triumphant satisfaction when she heard the crunch of his nose against her skull, but it was chased out soon by her own pitiful screaming. She had wanted to be brave, to hold it together, but she couldn't even stand as the voltage shot through her nerves.

All she could do was twitch and scream and shake until her captor turned it off.

"Don't fight," Li had warned her. "It won't do any good."

She had thought she was strong, but her body was still shaking with pain as she was dragged back to her feet.

"Do that again," the man said, the one whose nose she had not broken, "And I'll shoot you with one so bad you'll shit yourself."

With that threat, and the realization that Li had been right, that right now wasn't her moment (though she knew it was coming- it had to be), she let herself be led out of the warehouse and down a dark tunnel. It was clean enough, just a bit chilly, with no windows and no sound that would give a clue to where they were.

Then she was abruptly jerked to a stop in front of a door.

"All right hot stuff," her captor said. "Time to get pretty for the masses."

A door opened and she was shoved inside, before she could turn around and ask what the hell was going on, the door slammed shut. Her eyes immediately began searching for an escape. It was a small, sterile room that smelled deeply of bleach.

Still no windows.

She ran over to the wall and felt against it- desperately groping for any sensation, thickness, or material that would indicate where she was. It was just tiled wall- not unlike her bathroom at home. IN the corner there was a counter that almost looked like a vanity table.

What the hell was going on here?

The door opened again behind her. She whipped around to make a

break for the door just as two women entered. They were identical twins, with pale skin and long white hair that framed severe cheekbones and angled faces.

One was carrying a folded pile of clothes while the other held what looked like a tackle box of some kind- almost like the one she and her dad would take down to the lake when they went fishing. She somehow doubted that there were any lures or bait in there.

“Who are you?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady. They ignored her as they crossed the room toward her. She back away from them and widened her stance, ready to fight. She could take them- unless they had some hidden quirk.

She knew she could.

She...

One of them held up a finger and shook it at her, as though scolding a dog, and then pointed at her wrist where a slender cuff was wrapped with three buttons on it. She recognized it- it was the same bracelet that the asshole on the other side of the door was wearing, the one that had sent her helpless to her knees.

One of them reached out toward her without further ado and started to tug up at her dirty, bloody shirt.

“What the hell are you doing?” she screamed backing away from her and out of reach. Again, no words were spoken, they just advanced on her. She fiercely slapped their hands away and continued to back further into the room away from them, but they were undeterred, this time reaching for the sweat pants she was wearing. “Get off,” she screamed.

She knew it would be a hard lesson to learn, as she shoved one of the women off of her with enough force to send her flying back (God she missed her quirk). But the lesson seized her body, a painful reminder of what was inside of her head.

It was a small enough shock but sent her crumbling to her knees before she even made it to the door. And, again, she couldn't help but wonder about the true fatal capabilities of her peers; Kaminari's quirk was often joked about, used to charge phones and jumpstart vehicles- how much did he hold back? How much potential did he have? Because these small, violent shocks were taking her out with vicious expediency.



The bony, reaching hands found her again and this time made quick work of her clothes. Ochako was not someone who was particularly anxious about her body. She didn't consider herself exceptionally modest or immodest (she wore a skin-tight suit on the regular after all) and had come to appreciate parts of her body that had only a year ago made her feel anxious and insecure. But all the same, this was different, but her feeble attempts to cover herself were short-lived as her body was suddenly forcibly jerked across the room, and the sudden sting of water, freezing on her skin.

She let out a startled cry as it soaked into her and then closed her eyes tight as she stood beneath it.

"Please," she whispered, not loud enough to be heard by anyone but her over the stream of water, and she wasn't sure who it was too, but it was all she could manage as she squeezed her eyes shut tighter, willing herself to be anywhere else, willing herself to wake up from this nightmare, willing herself back to her bed, back to her friends. "Please," she croaked, shaking under the stream of water. "I just want to go home."

Just as her body was starting to adjust to the chill, she felt herself being jerked back out of the shower. She opened her eyes just enough to look at the women at either side of her, toweling her off with a relatively puffy towel, deft and quick, almost like butler's- almost as if she wasn't a prisoner.

"Please," she said, her voice soft. "I'm 16. My name is Ochako Uraraka. I'm...I'm 16 years old. I'm a student. I have a family and I just want to go home. Please."

The women didn't stop, didn't pause, didn't even look at her. She may as well be a ghost, even as they began rubbing lotion over her red, dry skin. She yelped again as the hands moved over her body without hesitation or regard for...well anything.

She closed her eyes again and took a deep breath.

If she had her quirk, even with the shocks, she was sure she could get out.

If she didn't have her quirk and there was on shocks, she was always sure she could get out.

If all she had to do was get past these two women and not the man she knew was waiting for her on the other side of the door, she was

sure she could get out.

But right now- naked, without a quirk, and no obvious sign of escape- she was sure this wasn't her moment either. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. She could do this. She couldn't panic. She couldn't lose her nerve.

She needed to pay attention.

Deku would find a way to get out.

Todoroki would find a way to get out.

Bakugo would have certainly murdered at least one person by now- quirk or not.

She had to focus before it was too late.

She needed to get out. She knew what was coming. Li had warned her and she had to figure a way out before she had too...

She shook it off. She couldn't entertain the thought- it wouldn't help her- not now. She was a hero.

"Get dressed..."

She opened her eyes again and looked at where the woman was pointing, toward the creepy vanity table. That was an order that Ochako would follow. But, as she approached the table, she felt a sinking feeling in her gut. From a distance, she could have mistaken it as her own uniform, but upon closer inspection she found herself growing ill.

The skirt was hardly a skirt- pleated and ridiculous- barely covering her butt- the underwear was simple- white and filly- and, she imagined, easily seen under her skirt. She held the material shakily in her hand and looked briefly over her shoulders at the women, pleadingly. But they remained cold and impassive.

"Please," she said. "I..."

"Put on the clothes," one of the women barked. "There is no time to dawdle." Ochako was standing in a room with strangers, naked, and somehow that felt more comfortable- far more natural- than the thought of wearing this outfit.

But, slowly, she bent and put on the underwear first, and then the

skirt, then the blazer. She trembled as she pulled it on, it was far lower cut than anything she would have ever worn, as she buttoned it up shakily she couldn't help but wonder, why?

What was this for?

Why all of this?

What was the point?

What was the goal?

Next, she pulled on the thigh high socks, complete with pink bows at the top that made her feel distinctly ill, and then, finally, she slid on the patent, leather shoes.

Her skin was crawling.

She turned to face the women who were already on top of her, one forced her into the chair and another opened up the tackle box and attacked her face with a rush, clouds of powder and blush choked her, and flakes of mascara and eye shadow were making her eyes water, and a thick red, paint smoothed over her lips.

They jerked and brushed and untangled her hair and pulled it into two braids on either side of her face. Almost like her mom would do- except nothing like her mom would do.

She just sat there.

Like a doll, a doll they were dressing, making up, fashioning into someone, something, she didn't recognize.

She clenched her hands tight in her lap, her nails biting into her palm.

Don't panic.

Don't panic.

She stifled a sob- she wanted this to be a nightmare.

She needed to wake up.

She was a hero.

A hero.

A hero.

Don't forget.

No matter her clothes, her hair, she was a hero.

No matter what.

When they were done- there was no way for her to see the finished product, and she wasn't sure if she was relieved about that or not. She supposed it didn't matter. She needed to focus. She didn't have time to think about how deeply uncomfortable she was, to think about the suffocating sensation of makeup caked onto her skin.

None of that mattered as she was led out of the room. The man who had escorted her here made some comment that didn't quite make it into her consciousness, which she was grateful for, before he shoved her in front of him, urging her to walk down the hall.

The hall was long and dimly lit with no noticeable markers. Nowhere to run if she did subdue her captor. She thought for a moment that, maybe, there would be a chance when he led her onto an elevator. But he kept her firmly in front of him, hand at the ready to punish her for any sudden movements.

There may have been a chance when the elevator door opened had she not been blinded by the floodlights, by the screaming, by a voice over a loudspeaker, moving between languages, some she recognized and some she didn't. She stood, shakily in the elevator in front of the short entryway that led her right to the raucous cheering and the harsh, white lights.

"Get going," he said, his palm shoving painfully between her shoulder blades, moving her forward.

She was shoved into a throng of people, many nicely dressed, almost like the kind of people she imagined would be at the races, betting on a prized horse.

The lights were not only blinding, but also hot, despite her lack of clothing, and they obscured the faces of those closest to her, though she could hear them cheering and jeering her arrival.

"...And making her debut here tonight, give a warm welcome to Sekushi Mei."

Ochako stumbled slightly in the midst of the smoke and the noise, but the man behind her shoved her forward again like an offering sent to satiate a pack of wolves.

She bent her head low, averting her eyes from the spectators, from the shouting- it wasn't the smartest thing to do, she knew that. She needed to be looking around. She needed to be searching for a way out- sorting out where she was- but she couldn't bring herself to raise her face to them.

That was until an errant hand from a spectator reached out as she passed, and groped at her butt under the skirt. Her body acted on instinct- not caring for her precarious situation, for how little power she had in the situation- someone touched her she would react to it.

So she whipped around to land a hard right-hook; the man stumbled backward into the crowd, which erupted into cheers and laughter at the spectacle.

"You see that..." laughed the disembodied voice from somewhere in the room, the voice booming out above the cheers. "She may be cute, but kitty packs a punch."

Ochako felt a sharp elbow in the back of her shoulder. No shock. But a warning not to get too many ideas. She looked up, her eyes adjusting to the sensory overload- to the raised stage in the middle of the room, a blue crackling dome centered over it, encasing it.

She could see people inside of the cage scrubbing blood off of the clear dome. She continued to move forward- each step feeling lighter and lighter as if she were no longer present in her body as if she was floating away.

Almost.

She paused in front of the steps and waited, trying desperately to bring herself back into her body. She had to pay attention.

She had to get out.

"Get your ass in there," growled her escort, shoving her up the stairs onto the raised platform the dome opening up for her- the electric blue glow around it disappearing as it opened.

"No," she said, pausing before the opening and back up. "I'm not gonna..."

“You’re gonna do exactly what I say if you want your legs to go unbroken,” he growled low in her ear. “Now get the fuck in there...” Another harsh shove sent her flying through the clear door and then shut quickly behind her.

She turned toward it, slamming viciously on the clear, cold dorm. It was thick and there was no way she would be able to break it.

“Oh, looks like she’s shy,” the M.C. shouted. “Maybe we should all show her a little love and she’ll come out and play.” The man on the other side looked bored with her as she screamed at him through the glass and pounded at it furiously, which made hot, frustrated tears spring to her eyes- tears of deep, unbridled rage.

“And making his second appearance with us tonight is Kuno!”

The crowd’s cheers were a bit more tempered for her opponent. She turned and looked over her shoulder at the other prisoner. He was fearsome on first sight- with four long arms, barbed with short sticky hair; two clicking fangs protruded from his mouth.

“It’s beauty and the beast tonight,” cried the voice, working the crowd into a frenzy. “And I can’t help but be a little jealous of our arachnid friend who will get a chance to sink his teeth into that pretty little thing.”

Ochako met the man’s eyes for a brief moment from across the dome, and he immediately looked away, and she felt a slight tug of affection. So far every look had been leering and hateful and gross. Something she wasn’t used to. This man, may or may not kill her tonight, but in that small act of looking away from her, granting her some privacy even as they were on display for the world, she felt a little more human.

“All right, ladies and gents, let’s get this party started and remember, no matter what...” The voice cut away and the crowd raised theirs to fill the gap with practiced precision.

“There. Will. Be. Blood!”

She winced as the yelling somehow grew louder, then a bell rang out, and suddenly the man across from her, his second fight giving him a bit more confidence she supposed, sprinted toward her.

“I’m sorry,” he cried out. “I’m so...so...”

She easily moved out of his reach, pivoting on her right leg, avoiding making contact with his arms. It wasn't hard to identify the nature of his quirk, so she should avoid his arms and fangs, and go for the legs. She wouldn't kill him.

She refused to kill him.

But she didn't want to die either.

"Ooh she's a quick one! That ass doesn't seem to be slowing her down too much! Kuno will have to do better than that."

Cheers and catcalls filled the air as one of his long appendages lashed out at her. She knocked it away easily and found, sure enough, that her skin stuck to the sticky hair there.

"Looks like this may be a short fight folks! If Kuno gets a bite in then..."

She jumped as one of his other limbs reached around to grab hold of her.

Shit. What was he going to do?

She could tell, from the speed, flow, and predictability of this guy's movement, that he was not a fighter. She yanked her hand away abruptly, leaving some of her skin behind, and backed away from him. Maybe she could just exhaust him.

There had to be a way for them both to survive.

There had to be a way that she could save them both.

That's what heroes do.

It's what Deku would do.

"Use your fucking quirk," yelled her handler, his voice pissed and frustrated with her. Apparently, she was not giving him the show he had wanted. She looked down at her hands. She had her quirk back. She knew that...Li had told her that they hadn't taken it away, but they had a way to control it now. Something inside of her that let them suppress and stimulate her quirk.

"Looks like the new girl has been around the block a few times," said the MC. "But she hasn't landed a punch yet."

Tears blurred her vision.

She wanted out.

Out of these clothes.

Out of this cage.

Why was she here?

Why wasn't she at school?

With her friends.

With her parents?

She wanted...

"Pat attention!"

She looked up as a white string of web shot out at her. She brushed herself with her fingers and flung herself up into the air into a weightless backflip.

The crowds cheered, happy with her entertainment. She hated them. And that frightened her. She had never hated anyone in her life- she didn't even know that she could hate anyone. But that was exactly what sprung to life in her- a terrifying rage.

She had her quirk back- she wasn't defenseless anymore. But the real villains, not the frightened man stuck in this cage with her, were on the other side of this dome. She snarled as she released herself, falling hard into the spider. He slapped her away from him, sending her flying into the dome, the electric current in it burning her skin and sending her scrambling away.

Kuno let out another cry- a scream- frightening and sad and pained as he lumbered toward her. Ochako stood and quickly activated her quirk on herself again and leaped across the distance between them, meeting him in the air. Her hand clamped hard onto his shoulder. She returned her gravity just as she took his away and landed behind him.

He let out a grunt as she tossed him like pancake into the air.

"Looks like Sekushi Mei is going to fry him; gonna smell like burned chicken in this place."



She pressed her finger pads together when he was inches away from the top of the dome, and sent him falling back into the ground before he could make contact with the electrified ceiling.

The crowd booed their objections to the show of mercy; she spun and glared at them all; as if it would do anything; as if it would do any good, but she needed them to know, she needed them to know in that moment that she hated them.

“Shut up,” she screamed.

It spilled out of her from some previously unknown place that boiled her blood and flooded her body with fire. She had never in her life felt like this.

Heroes weren’t supposed to feel this way. She had already failed.

Kuno groaned as he stood up from the ground. She knelt to check on him, but the now-familiar jolt of electricity through her back and away from her opponent. It was brief, a warning that compassion was not what people came here to see.

“Oooh her handler is not happy with her,” commented the MC.  
“Doubt she’ll be making that mistake again.” She went to her knees and took a deep, steady breath.

“Kill that freak,” screamed her “handler” apparently.

“No,” she screamed, another shock.

“I said do it!”

She gritted her teeth so hard she feared they may break them in her own jaw.

“Kill him now!”

She screamed in protest and staggered backward as Kuno stood up. He looked at her pityingly as another punishing current went through her body. She wondered if that would be what would kill her. It seemed like a lot of wasted work on their part to kill her this way.

But maybe they knew what they were doing.

Maybe they were practiced in this particular form of torture.

“Get up and fight,” her handler screamed.

Kuno was moving toward her, but slowly- conflict raging in his eyes even as his fangs dripped with venom.

Kill or be killed.

A hero would be killed, right?

If she were Deku, as noble as Deku, she would be killed.

A hero wouldn't kill someone so they could live.

And yet...

She dropped back from where she was on her knees and rolled out of Kuno's reach and up onto her feet a fluid motion, taking the huge opening he left for her, pressing her pads onto his torso. She flung him up once again, this time letting him briefly make contact before she let him fall.

Maybe she could knock him out.

She screamed again in frustration- in anger- in almost fucking annoyance- as another jolt went through her body.

Kill or be killed.

She wouldn't.

She couldn't.

She heard herself screaming because she didn't know what else to do. Because maybe if she screamed loud enough someone would find her. Somehow, through the haze of cheers and her own screams, she heard the MC say that Kuno was unconscious. She could hear her handler screaming at her, and she was on her knees again, then on her back with the onslaught of electric torture on her body.

She could feel it.

But she also couldn't.

She wondered if again if she was going to die here. She felt her numb body being dragged out of the dome as two hulking figures in black cloaks and masks walked past her. She heard people cheering.

What were they cheering for? She hadn't killed him.

But she heard him screaming anyway. She could hear the sickening sound of life being hacked away, and the cheers of bloodlust.

They had made a promise- the audience knew it well.

There will be blood.

###

Her next fight, her handler took her quirk away for most of it, crippling her defensive strategy. All the same, she made quick work of her opponent this time- Gunhead's training coming in to keep her alive. Her opponent was not unconscious, but she wasn't fighting anymore; she couldn't even stand.

Ochako had missed the woman's name; she was an adult, Ochako thought; equally scared to be there. Ochako should be able to save her. She should be able to save them both. She was a hero, after all. But she didn't know how to do it.

She certainly wouldn't kill her and she was prepared to be punished for that. But it never came. Her body wasn't set on fire and she wasn't sent screaming to the floor. Instead, she was declared the winner. Her handler met her in the dome and directed her gaze to her opponent, as the two men in black reappeared like ghostly reapers.

"This is what happens when there's a tie," the handler growled. "Or someone is too weak to finish the kill."

The Reapers did not make their deaths quick.

She tried to look away, tried to see the faces of the people, hundreds of people, who were thrilled to watch this- thrilled to see blood spilled- thrilled to see a life taken away.

Suddenly, Shigaraki and the League of Villains didn't seem so frightening. She understood them, at least, in some ways. This- this she couldn't conceive- this she couldn't make space for in her mind. She felt rough hands clamp down on either side of her face and force her gaze back toward the dreadful spectacle- her eyes, her nose, her mouth, her ears, all filling with a gruesome sight.

"Still think you're being kind by not finishing the job the way you're supposed to," he spat. "Normal humans pay a shit ton of money to see a quirked freak go down- so we make sure they do."

###

That night after she vomited up what little food she had in her- Li handed her a bit he had stored away, passing it through the bars to her.

She smiled gratefully, despite it all.

It was what Deku, what All-Might, would do- they would smile, no matter what.

After all, someone was coming. They were looking for her. They would find her.

###

Her third fight was jam-packed and the cheers for her opponent almost shook the room. He was a golden-haired young man, a few years older than her if she had to guess, and this was not his first time here. He was a regular. Comfortable.

He raised his thick arms into the air and made kissy faces at her and then his fans.

“Guy is a prick,” her handler told her as he walked her inside. “IF you take him out you get a special treat tonight.”

She didn’t respond.

She just stepped into the dome- the first sings of numbness setting in. Her past two fights she had been reduced to tears quickly, desperate to get out, all but begging anyone she made eye contact with to help her. This disturbed her- it was only a moment of feeling nothing- no fear or worry- just nothing; and it terrified her, and then was replaced by deep shame.

The boy was somewhat popular in this sick world, but she did not grudge him that. She supposed he did what he needed to survive. She decided she would end it quickly. She used the boy own quirk, a row of spikes that protruded from his forearms. She had him down in minutes, impaled through the chest by his own spikes. She used his weight and her own to press the spikes between the ground and their bodies.

She wanted it to be quick.

She saw the look of shock on his face as she moved off of him, as he rolled over slightly onto his side, his blood pulling between them both. She wanted to look away. She didn't want to look someone in the eyes while they died.

But she owed him that.

His shock became sadness.

And then fear.

And then she couldn't look away from.

The crowd cheered ecstatically even as their favorite bled out in front of them. They didn't care who lived and who died, they were interchangeable in their eyes. She wondered if he cared in this moment; if he could hear their cheers.

She hoped not.

She slid her hand into his and she squeezed it lightly as the crimson pool reached her knees.

To her surprise, he squeezed it back.

He wasn't alone.

###

"You did good, sweetheart."

Ochako walked behind her handler, eyes burning into his back, her clothes stained with blood. After the fight, he did not take her the usual way back to the warehouse, back to her cage. Instead, he diverted her to another elevator.

How big was this place? How could it have so many rooms and still no one had found her yet?

They stepped off of the elevator into a carpeted hallway. Everything was still unmarked. Still no windows.

They must be underground, she was beginning to think- they could be anywhere underground.

"The boss likes what he sees," he said. "And so do the patrons."

She continued to ignore him.

“You know,” he said, suddenly stopping in front of a door and turning to face him. “You should smile, honey. You’re about to get a bath and a good meal.”

She scoffed and looked up at him.

“I’d rather go back to my cage,” she said. Her handler raised an eyebrow and looked at her amused.

“No one cares what you want, sugar,” he said. He turned to face the door they had paused in front of and punched in a code that opened it up. “Now go on in, hurry and clean up and eat. You have a busy night.”

Her stomach twisted and she looked inside the room, terror like nothing she had felt shooting through her. It was like a hotel room.

She turned to face him, her brow furrowed and eyes questioning as if she couldn’t believe what he was asking of her.

This has to be a misunderstanding.

It’s too much.

“You’re platinum level now, sweetheart,” he leered down at her. “Congratulations.”

She shook her head and backed away from him. “Wha-what do you mean?” she whispered. She wasn’t stupid- young and inexperienced yes- but not stupid. But something in her refused to believe it- something in her refused to accept that this was coming.

“Take it as a compliment,” he said. “You’re popular.”

“No,” she stepped back away from him again. “No, please...” she started to beg, all pride gone.

“Sex and violence, kid,” he said, motioning toward the door. “They sell on their own, and even better when you put them together.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Please,” her voice hitched pitifully, but she didn’t care. “Let me go...” a hot tear released from her eyes, carving a path down her blood and makeup covered face. “Please I just...I want to go home. Please let me go home.”

“Sorry babe, no can do.” He reached down and took her chin in his

hands. "Chin up," he said. "A warm bath and a good meal and a soft bed ain't so bad. Keep up the good work and you could end up the boss's main attraction. Which," he shrugged. "Since I brought you here would be good for me and that comes with a lot of perks."

She didn't even jerk her face out of his hands, she didn't look away, in a last-ditch effort she reached out to him, grasping his wrist in her hand as she fell to her knees, attempting to appeal to any human that may be inside of him.

"Please," she sobbed. "Please. My name is Ochako Uraraka. I'm...I'm 16 years old. My birthday is in a few months. I have parents who... who love me and miss me. I've never...never even kissed a boy before...never been in...never been with someone...Please..."

He reached down to her and cupped her cheek, and she felt hope for a moment, a ridiculous stupid moment. But when he smiled down at her, nothing like kindness to be found there, it dissipated immediately.

"Rest those knees girl," he said, jerking her back to her feet. "Don't want to wear them out so early."

###

Katsuki was starting to get angry. Three weeks was way too fucking long and these goddamn pros were supposed to be the best; they were the best- with every fucking resource at their disposal.

So why the fuck was her desk still empty?

It was really starting to piss him off.

After class, he waited for his chance. He didn't need anyone else to hear him. He sped up, falling in behind Deku. His hand shot out and grabbed the idiot's backpack and jerked him out of the hallway and into the nearest empty classroom.

"Woa," he cried, regaining his footing and spinning around, face awash with confusion. "Hey Kacchan, what are you..."

"Don't fucking start with me," he spat. "I just want to know what your dumb plan is." He shoved his hands into his pockets and glared at him. "Chances are it's stupid and you'll need me to fix it anyway, so just tell me what it is now."

Deku's brow furrowed in confusion, setting Katsuki's teeth on edge

"What- what do you mean?"

Katsuki let out a frustrated growl and ran his hands over his face. "To find fucking Pink Cheeks or whatever..."

Deku's face crumpled immediately, it was nauseating and pitiful.

"Kacchan," he said, his voice breaking into a desperate sob. "I went back to where she was taken. I talked to merchants who worked there, talked to All Might and Tsu. There was no surveillance, nothing that... I..."

If someone had asked him in that moment, Katsuki would have lied about the fact that he felt something like a sinking feeling in his stomach as he tried to make sense of Deku's words. That wasn't in itself surprising. He wasn't friends with her or anything, but she was his fucking classmate; a tough competitor and she was on her way to being a good hero. She had busted her ass over the summer and it was showing. Plus, he would care if fucking Deku or Icy Hot got snatched up too, he would want to figure out a way to get them back too.

Because he was a hero. That was his job.

But even then, there was a small ache in his chest that he couldn't fully account for every time he looked at that empty desk.

"It's been three fucking weeks," he spat. "Three fucking weeks and you haven't been planning something?" Deku wiped away his tears with his wrist. "It took you morons less than 48 hours to get me back!"

"We knew where you were," cried Deku, desperate self-loathing already swirling in his voice. "We knew the villains who took you! We knew what city you were in, and we even had a tracker. We have nothing here...we have no idea..."

"So," he scoffed, shaking his head. "The pros gotta be onto something..." Katsuki's voice stubbornly bit off the question mark at the end of that sentence. They had to be. "That's their job," he insisted. "To pull off the impossible."

Deku was sobbing now- the same way he had cried for Katsuki when he was taken.



“Fine,” Katsuki said, his cold. “Cry about it. Good fucking thing Uraraka doesn’t need one of your fucking plans to get back.”

He stormed out of the room, an inexplicable rage in his gut. He stormed down the hall- a stomp that everyone knew to move out of the way when they heard that.

He needed to hit something.

Everyone was so fucking useless.

###

Ochako returned to the cage the next morning- or perhaps it wasn’t morning. She didn’t know what day it was. She didn’t know what time it was. She didn’t even know how long she had been there. She had tried to count the days at first.

She had been telling Li that they only had to wait there a little longer; one more day, she had kept telling him. One more day, she had told him with a smile.

The heroes were coming.

They always came. And they would come for her.

But this time when she returned, her body aching and bleeding and cold, she didn’t smile at Li. She didn’t have it in her. She just slumped to the small cot on the ground and curled up into a ball, stifling as sob at the unfamiliar cramping sensation.

She didn’t smile at him. Didn’t even look at him.

But she did let him reach through the bars. He rested an open palm beside her head; an invitation, should she need it.

She clamped her hand in his tight and laced her fingers through his, almost desperately.

“I’m sorry, Ochako,” he said, his voice quiet and knowing. “I’m so sorry.”

She squeezed his hand tight- like that boy had done when she held him- when he was bleeding to death beneath her.

She wasn’t alone.

###

“Why the hell is this taking so damn long?”

Tsukauchi visibly winced at Aizawa’s raised voice, but he couldn’t bring himself to care- even more than usual.

“We have no real clues,” he said. “We are cooperating with as many other precincts as possible and as many pros as possible. But frankly, we don’t even know if she’s in the country anymore.”

Aizawa felt himself growing tenser by the second. He knew, of course, that Tsukauchi was right. But they had pros all over the world. There was no reason that they couldn’t find one teenage girl. If they couldn’t do that, then what the hell could they do?

What was the point of any of it?

Aizawa looked around the table, surrounded by some of the best heroes and detectives in the country. And yet, four weeks later, Uraraka was still missing.

They were all failures.

He was a failure.

He looked up in the midst of the tense silence at Detective Tsukauchi who was looking at him almost nervously, his jaw clenched and conflict clear in his eyes.

“What?” he asked, his voice sharp.

Tsukauchi breathed out slowly. “It’s been a month,” he said. “That’s a long time Eraserhead. We have to face the reality that she very well...”

Aizawa’s fist collided loudly with the table and his chair flew back, clattering to the floor. He looked down at the table, at his fist slammed into it. He took a deep, heaving breath, trying to find his equilibrium, trying to quell the exhaustion and the anger in his chest. He shouldn’t take this out anyone else- this was his fault.

“Then,” he said, softly. “Then we find the people who took her. We find them or we find her body so we can give her parents...” His voice was shaking again. “We give her parents something...anything other than waiting.”

Tsukauchi nodded. "Understood."

Aizawa reached behind him and set his chair back up as he slumped into it. All-Might reached out toward him and placed his hand on his shoulder, but he jerked away.

He didn't deserve comforting- not now.

He had failed- failed as a hero, as a teacher, as a mentor.

He had failed.

Again.

## Chapter End Notes

If you skipped because the content is triggering at all and would rather skip to the healing:

- Ochako is forced to take on a degrading "fighting" persona
- She opts not to kill her opponents for the first few fights but learns that their fate is worse if left alive at the end of a fight
- After she grows in popularity her captors upgrade her status and she is a fighter that spectators can pay to have a night with
- The heroes and detectives are trying to find her and Aizawa wrestles with guilt or not protecting his class.

# A Failed Mission

## Chapter Summary

Ochako makes her escape.

## Chapter Notes

CW\*\*

Descriptions of blood and violence

Kinda Descriptions of self-harm (it's for the purpose of her escape and it doesn't become a regular thing in the story)

Ochako wondered why she wasn't afraid anymore. Her heart no longer pounded and lurched when she stepped into the dome.

Was it because she knew she wouldn't die?

Of course, she couldn't know that. Anyone could slip up. She could slip up. But she won't. Somehow, she knows that no matter what, some part of her will always claw its way back to life- no matter what.

Or was it just that she didn't care anymore?

Over the past few weeks, she had learned how to disengage; to escape inside of herself (or outside of herself, it was hard to tell). She wondered if this was how Deku and Bakugo managed to do what they did- managed to make it through the brutal punishments they put their body through. Did they just remove themselves from it, like how she removed herself from the blood, the groping hands, and the hot mouths?

The only time she felt anything, any spark of anything, any information on her skin, was when she fell asleep holding Li's hand.

Sometimes she even laughed with him.

Sometimes she told him stories about what life was like before this. It was odd. She couldn't quite keep an accurate count of the days or weeks that she had been gone- but she was fairly certain it wasn't years, and yet when she spoke of life before it seemed so distant.

Like she was watching a movie play out in front of her that she wasn't really a part of.

But she told him about Deku and how good he was. She told him about Tsu and how brave she was; about Mina and how fun she was; about Kirishima and how manly he was; about Bakugo and how cool he was. But they all seemed so far away from her now, and it seemed so strange that they could mean so much to her and she may never see them again.

He told her about his life from before too. He told her that like many others here he was an orphan, without a family; without anyone to look for them. They made for easy prey. Some of the fighters, he said, were sold by their parents because of their untamable quirks. He explained how his life on the streets had prepared him for his life here.

It was why he kept surviving.

He had been there for four months. And even though she had stopped smiling for him, stopped assuring him that she would get him out, he still held her hand all the same. And that was something, and she had nothing.

He still called her Ochako, and that was everything. He called her Ochako when she came back after a night of losing her soul all over again, of losing her body all over again. He held her hand a lot those first few nights; he never told her it would be okay, he just whispered that he was there.

That she wasn't alone.

He reminded her of what her name was. She may not be a hero, but she was still Ochako.

So, when he didn't return after one night she noticed of course, but she didn't panic. She knew when he didn't come back from his fight that he likely wouldn't be back until the next day, just as many of her nights were spent in those awful rooms with strangers.

The second night- she started to worry. Li had told her once that sometimes they travel, but that their warehouse was one that people usually traveled too. But still, he could be traveling.

The third night- she started to panic.

The fourth night- her fourth night without Li- she sobbed loudly into her pillow- ignoring the shouts for her to shut up (what were they gonna do to her after all?). She was terrified, almost as scared as she had been when she first arrived here.

When the fifth night came and went, she knew in her bones that would never see Li again. She knew he had lost his fight.

She spent the sixth night numb, unmoving, frozen on her cot.

By the tenth night she was a creature possessed by rage and fury; a black hole of anger. When the handler asked her, a cruel sneer on his lips, if she missed her boyfriend, her skull found his nose in a flash of reckless fuck-it-all. It was more than worth the familiar shock.

It had been a while after all.

She wanted that man to bleed- and she wanted to be the one to do it.

Her fight that night went by in a blur. It was close though- the woman was a skilled fighter with a tongue that lashed out like a whip that could flay the skin off of her bones. She tapped into her training sessions with Tsu for this fight.

She wondered what Tsu was doing tonight. Was she okay? Was she safe?

She hoped so.

Her moment of distracted wondering cost her as the tongue caught her face, barbs sinking in and stripping a ribbon of skin from her hairline down to her jaw, cutting through her eyebrow. She typically fought men, men quite a bit larger than her. She knew they set that up on purpose- her handler had told her that. It was for the optics; and it made her more desirable in the eyes of patrons. Something they would want to spend money on.

*“To watch a little girl like you conquer in the ring and then be conquered in the bedroom is a turn on, Sweet Cheeks.”*

The tongue swiped against her calf pulling away a chunk of skin and muscle, but this time she was ready. She reached down and grabbed the tongue before it disappeared back into her opponent’s mouth. The barbs on the muscle cut deep into her palm, shredding the skin there.

“LET GO!”

She whipped around; the panic in her handler's voice rising above the cheers and shouts of the rabid crowd, enough to grab her attention. "Let go of her fucking tongue!" He pounded at the dome angrily, his eyes wide with terror. She let go of the tongue but not before giving it a violent jerk, pulling the woman toward her.

Ochako always tried her best to minimize pain- as much as it was in her power to do so. They noticed, of course, her handlers, the crowds, but lucky for her, if anything about this could be considered lucky, she had yet to be punished for her displays of mercy. If anything, it had become a part of her persona.

Sweet, sexy little sister, who held her victims in her arms while they died, who cried over them as if she hadn't just ended their lives. They all stayed with her- she hadn't forgotten a single set of eyes since that first time. They haunted her sleep- the widened eyes and gasping breathes. But she couldn't bring herself to look away- she never could. It was the least she could do, to not look away, to not leave them totally alone.

She wondered if there was any scrap of hero left in her.

So, like always, she held the woman who had bitten off her own tongue- who was gurgling on her own blood as Ochako cradled her head in her lap.

"I'm so sorry," Ochako whispered as the crowd cheered. It was the least she could offer, and she always did. Maybe it was a feeble attempt to atone, to offer something of softness and compassion before they died.

After they took the woman's body away- she wondered as she often did- what her real name had been before all this.

Would her body end up where Li's had?

Though she didn't entertain the wondering long as her handler was already in the dome, still panic-stricken. She watched him closely as he grabbed her hand, searching for something. Sure, the cut was deep in her palm but it wasn't the worst injury she had sustained here. In fact, she had expected him to be more concerned for the dripping stripe that slashed its way across her face. But maybe that, like so many things, would become a part of her brand. This thing that was being sold for an amount that she wasn't even aware of.

But she saw it- for a flash of a moment- she saw relief in his eyes when

he released her hand. Her palm was ripped to shreds but there was relief in his eyes.

“All right,” he said finally. “Let’s get you cleaned up.” She nodded, slowly, she was ready for this night to end, but not for the same reason she usually was. This was different.

This time, one, small sharp barb from her opponent’s tongue was hidden in her other hand, and she held onto it like a lifeline. Not a weapon- not big enough to be useful for an escape- but big enough for her purposes.

###

Somehow, slowly, disturbingly, things had gone back to something that looked like normal at UA, and year two continued on, a month and a half passing quickly, leaving Katuski confused and uneasy.

The entire situation seemed so...off.

His world, for the most part, was left unchanged. He had not been devastated by the loss of Uraraka- at least not as much as his classmates had been, even those he didn’t even know were close to her seemed deeply impacted by the loss. Uraraka was not his friend, they barely spoke to each other, but...she was part of his team, and he was stubborn, a dog with a bone, and he hated incompetence more than he hated anything else.

Surely the pros weren’t out there twiddling their thumbs. He barely saw Eraserhead anymore and when he did see the guy, he somehow always managed to reach new levels of exhaustion that Katsuki thought he had maxed out years ago.

But her desk was still empty, and it was really pissing him off.

Especially, whenever he saw that almost everyone else, people who cared a hell a lot more about her as a person than he did, was attempting to get back to their life. Granted Deku was still a mess, but he sure seemed to be finding comfort enough from Icy-Hot.

Katsuki didn’t understand.

The mission was incomplete.

Unfinished, and people were acting like it wasn’t.



You didn't stop when the mission wasn't done.

And she...she was still out there, after all.

###

Ochako wondered where Li was buried- where his body had ended up. It was the only thing that was in her head, aside from the sensation of the barb in her hand.

She thought she would like to find his body. She didn't know what happened to the bodies after a fight. She doubted they were taking up space somewhere, treated with any amount of dignity or respect.

But she knew there was no one to return it to.

No one who would mourn him.

No one except her.

Someone had to mourn him. It wasn't right that no one would be alive to remember him.

She had to escape or die trying.

And she wasn't going to die. If she was going to die, she would have done it already. She looked down into her palm where the sharp barb glinted in the dark.

Her handler, he had been so concerned about her hands. It had been a small enough injury but...he had been panicked that something had happened to her hand. It was a shot in the dark, and if it didn't pan out then she was well and truly screwed.

It was a gamble.

But one she was willing to make.

She brought her pillow up to her lap and bit hard into it. It was a guess- a hope; a hope that she wouldn't pass out, a hope that she wouldn't bleed to death, a hope that she had the right fucking hand. She breathed in and as she exhaled, and then dug the barb into the top of her finger, cutting through her precious finger pads, snagging at the rough skin there. She had to go deep- she knew that. She couldn't leave any stone (or bone) unturned right now. She had to make the most of this- this was her shot- her only shot- she wouldn't be able to hide this.

She dug deeper with the barb, muffling her screams into the pillow, cutting through tendons until she hit bone. She didn't pass out, but she almost did. She muffled her screams into the pillow; trying to let go- to disconnect- to shut it out.

The way she did in the dome.

The way she did when she went into those rooms.

By the third finger- her ring finger- she had effectively disassociated.

No pain.

Just jagged skin, just ripped tendons, just blood as she explored the meat and bone for any sign that this half-cocked plan, built from sadness, desperation, and hunger, wasn't all for nothing.

She was useless.

Stupid.

Not strong enough save to save Li.

Not strong enough to save herself.

Then she felt it and she froze, in her left-hand ring finger. Something that didn't belong. It was flat as a razor against her finger bone, blinking and tiny. Doing something to her body; taking control of it; taking away the only thing that made her special.

She used the barb to pry it up- the scrape against her bone making her scream a profanity into the pillow, garnering a hush from her fellow prisoners. But she didn't care. It wasn't until it was out, the tiny blinking thing- that she let herself collapse onto her cot, blood streaming down her palm and wrist. She clutched it to her chest, bunching the shirt in her hand, attempting to stop the bleeding but the only thing she accomplished was soaking her shirt.

She took the blanket off of the cot, a wave of nausea and dizziness crashing over her at the effort, making it hard to balance on her knees, but she managed to stay upright until she got the blanket wrapped around her hand.

It was an odd sensation. She felt like she wasn't in her body anymore, but she could feel the dull sensation, the pressure, the openness, the exposed bone. It was like she was anesthetized, and somehow that

made every sensation even worse.

She fell onto her side and slammed her eyes shut, trying to control her breathing as she wrapped the blanket as tight as she could around her hand. She knew this was a bad injury, one that would not just stop bleeding. Her hand was mangled, and she didn't even know if her quirk worked anymore, and she needed to find out soon if this was going to work, she needed to find out before he came back.

But it was too much right now- she had to get the shaking in her body under control. She bit back the bitter bile of regret- the too-late and the "why didn't she do it sooner."

Before she had been so completely shattered.

Before Li had died.

She lay there, breathing through the pain a few more minutes, but she didn't have time to indulge for long. She had one shot and she couldn't waste it. She couldn't wait until the bleeding stopped or they would find out what had happened. She pushed herself up into a sitting position, and immediately felt cold and drained and fell back down onto the pillow.

*Get. Up.*

*Get. Up.*

*Do not fuck this up now.*

She had never been a swearer. She had never been offended by it, but she didn't do it regularly. And the names she was calling herself now, the horrible things she was screaming at herself, would make Bakugo blush. But it worked like it was the only thing her body new to respond too.

Maybe if she had talked to herself this way before, she wouldn't have ended up in this situation in the first place. Maybe if someone, if anyone, had screamed at sweet, round Ochako- she would be able to save her. She pushed herself up again and this time stayed sitting straight up, even if she was swaying a bit.

She slowly, torturously, unwrapped the blanket, exposing her still bleeding hands. She folded the skin carefully back down, trying to smooth it as much as she could over the bleeding wound, trying to preserve some semblance of her finger pads.

“Please still work,” she prayed, silently to herself. “Please still work.” She pressed the fingers of her good hand to the pillow and it floated upward. Good, at least she could still activate with one hand, that was something. She looked up at the pillow, floating against the ceiling of her cell.

Slowly, shakily she brought her hands together, she wasn’t sure with three destroyed finger pads if it would work. She wasn’t sure of her ability to release would be preserved. She pressed her fingers together lightly, hissing at the contact to her injured hand.

“Release,” she whispered.

The pillow didn’t move. She pressed them closer together, harder, stifling the yelp.

“Release...” she whispered again.

Nothing.

She bit back angry tears and pressed them harder, her good fingers digging into the sliced skin. “Release...” she growled. “Release... release...you son of...”

And then suddenly it dropped, and it fell like a brick, an unnatural speed of acceleration. She looked at it, eyes wide with shock.

She nudged the pillow; it was light again, mass normal. She breathed out and placed her fingers on the pillow again.

For the first time since Li died, she felt something other than rage; then anger; than numbness. She felt something that was almost like hope.

###

Ochako practiced as long as she could; breaking only to sop up the blood and sweat. Her constant contact with her ripped finger meant an almost constant flood of blood- but she would worry about that later. She took breaks when she heard people come in and out- other handlers who moved and removed other prisoners.

But hers was coming.

She waited; her body alight with anticipation, weightless, the only thing keeping her from floating up was her grip on the cot beneath

her. She waited; ready to strike, waited for the familiar whistled tune, alerting her to the fact that he was there, that he was coming for her.

She waited, ready for revenge- like some kind of villain, plotting in the dark. But she didn't care. Not now. She waited for the familiar gait; the beep of her cell as it opened.

"Okay, hot stuff..." She tensed, ready. One-shot. Her only shot. She couldn't freeze now. "Hey..." he snapped, a hand clamping on her shoulder to jostle her awake. "I said wake up..."

As soon as his hand landed on her shoulder, she grabbed it with her good hand, pressing all five fingers into his forearm. She rolled around to look at him, a wicked snarl on her lips.

"What the hell are you...?"

She lunged out of her cell, kicking off the ground and head butting her handler into the chest, sending them both flying through the open cell door and rolling in the air toward the high ceilings of the warehouse.

"What the fuck?" he screamed; shouts and questions and the sound of stirring prisoners filled the warehouse as they spun around in zero-g. But she was used to it. She knew how to move in this way- he didn't. And it thrilled her to see him flailing about in the air, her good hand clutching to his shirt. They spun out until both collided with the wall.

"I got my quirk back you piece of shit," she growled. She felt a surge of autonomy, of power. She curled her bad hand into a fist and slammed it into his face as hard as she could, his nose cracked and spurted with blood. It was the first time she had wanted to make someone bleed since being here. She punched him again, this time his head collided with the concrete ceiling of the warehouse above him.

"You bitch..." he sputtered. She shifted her body, rolling so that she was the one pressed to the ceiling, both hands grasping his shirt- his head lulling back, no doubt ringing and throbbing. She let go of him and pressed her fingers together hard. They were high up, but she had something soft to land on.

"Release!"

He let out a pained grunt as he landed hard on the floor, absorbing most of the shock for Ochako. He was still conscious, but from his labored breathing, she was pretty sure that a couple of ribs had broken in the fall.

His lips curled back in a malicious grin; white teeth painted red. “You gonna kill me too, sweetheart?”

She sat up, her knees on either side of his hips, pinning him. Her eyes roved over his face, searching for- well, anything, anything to convince her that he was a human who she shouldn’t kill. She had killed people- he had made her kill people- people who didn’t deserve to die.

He deserved it.

He should die.

And she felt a tiny bit of fear.

He looked like a human. He looked like anyone she would see on the street. He looked normal. He called her sweetheart- and, sometimes, it even sounded like something she could have read as affection. Sometimes he ruffled her hair after a fight- congratulating her on a win like he was a coach and she was his star player.

If someone could look and sound like a human and still be a monster, how could anyone be safe in this world?

Her eyes went down to the watch around his wrist. The one he would point at to remind her not to step out of line. She ripped it off viciously and threw it somewhere into the darkness of the warehouse.

“How do I open the cages?” she growled into his ear.

“Fuck you, bitch,” he sputtered through the blood and spit.

“My name,” she whispered, sliding off of him and rolling him onto his stomach and then grinding her knee into his lower back. “...is Ochako Uraraka.”

He groaned in pain as she yanked his head back again and dug her knee in harder, arching his body into a painful bow. “Ochako Uraraka,” she repeated, jerking him so far back she could whisper in his ear. “Ochako Uraraka.”

She barely recognized it- the name or her voice- both hers, but they didn’t sound like it.

“Ochako Uraraka,” she spat, slamming his face into the ground. She twisted her hands into his hair, opening up her own wounds and

spilling a fresh fountain of blood. She stepped up and off of him, grabbing him by the shirt collar. "Not sweetheart. Not bitch. Not hot stuff..."

She flung him up, sending him spinning and flailing into the air, and then she released. She didn't know what was happening with her quirk, but something was off; something wasn't working (or was), with very little rhyme or reason. This time when she released him, he fell hard- like the pillow- landing with bone-crushing speed.

He groaned and lifted his hand, and pressed his palm to the ground, and then sunk back before he could lift himself, but her hand on the back of his neck forced him down.

"Now...how do I open the cages?" she repeated, every possible threat in her voice. He was silent for a moment and she was worried that he was unconscious, but when she increased her grip on his neck, he let out a whimper.

"Back pocket," he coughed. "The card there- swipe it and..." Before he could finish she slammed his face once more into the ground and reached for the card and swiped it out- checking him for any phones or ways to communicate before she threw his limp and unresistant body into the cell, slamming it shut.

She was struck by how easy it was.

How pathetic he was.

How easy he was to take down when she had her quirk.

She should have done this sooner. Should have thought of it sooner... if she had, he'd still be alive.

"I want you to remember," she said, peering through the bars. "Remember that I didn't kill you."

Ochako quickly made her way through the darkroom, getting her first real look. There were 20 cages, three were empty, the ceiling was high and there were no windows. The prisoners who had woken up looked confused and afraid.

She looked down at the first cage, an older man was looking up at her, wide-eyed. "It's okay," she assured him. Was it? "I'm-I'm...I'm here."

But she couldn't smile.

She opened every cage- some people leaped out as soon as they could- some lingered, not trusting the liberation.

A younger woman, who looked to be in her twenties and possibly freshly caught stood in front of her. "How can I help?"

Ochako looked at the group surrounding her; all unable to access their quirks, all looking to her. She looked up at the ceiling. Fighting their way out wasn't an option, not when any one of those assholes could send them to the ground with the push of a button. Many of them were tired and malnourished, with broken bodies and broken spirits.

She looked down at her bleeding hand.

She would have to create an escape route.

"Get the rest into the hallway," she ordered. "I'm going to make an exit, but it could be dangerous so stay there until I come and get you." The woman nodded, her eyes alight and posture certain. Ochako waited for them to clear out, not knowing if she could pull this off- especially with her quirk acting up.

She didn't know how big this building was, or even what was on top of her, but she would take it all down.

She didn't have time to not know.

She wouldn't get another chance.

She could do this.

She could fucking do this.

She was getting out.

She activated her quirk on herself and jumped into the air.

She was getting all of them out of here.

When she reached the ceiling, she pressed her fingertips to the concrete there; to the thousands (at least) pounds suspended over her head. She wasn't so sure she could float it up, but maybe, maybe she could bring it down. Whatever she had done to herself, whatever had shifted, was unpredictable but it was strong.

She held her fingers there, concentrating on the weight of it, the texture of it, the pull of it, the surface area, and how it stretched to



hold up whatever was on the other side. She manipulated a force that kept the galaxy afloat, she could bring down this roof. The laws of physics were under her control.

She would take this bitch down. Even if it killed her. She poured herself into it- into the materials there- into the empty space between the molecules that made it- willing every last bit of it under control.

She had just started learning a controlled release before she was taken. But she didn't want to release. She wanted to tear the whole damn thing down; to send the ceiling crashing down like the pillow, like her handler.

She pressed her fingertips together and held them there- no release. She steepled her fingers hard against each other and looked up at the ceiling. Nothing happened. She pressed harder.

Her body was shaking as she stayed aloft- and nausea was starting to roll in her gut. But she didn't let go; a ringing filled her ears, but she pressed harder. She tasted blood, thick, and coppery on her tongue.

She could feel the ceiling shaking above her, but it held firm.

She pressed harder and she wondered if her fingers would ever heal as she buried her good fingers into the open skin, pushing out whatever was left inside. She felt like her body was about to break into a million pieces, but so was this goddamn ceiling.

She wasn't sure when she started screaming, and she wasn't sure if it was because her body was wrecked or her mind was just fucking over it, but when she opened her eyes again, it was to the sight of pieces of the ceiling cracking, breaking as it was tugged downward.

"Come on," she cried through gritted teeth. "Come on, Ochako!" The first big piece broke away, knocking hard against her shoulder on the way down, but she was too distracted by the rush of cold air. Another broke away, she tried to move away from it, but a stray piece scraped down her back. But she could not care less right now. Because she could feel air moving- cold, fresh air.

"Goddammit," she sobbed and heaved as the wind bit at her.  
"Goddammit."

It was all she could say as the sky fell around her; it was the only relief-soaked prayer she had to offer. She couldn't believe it. She had done it, and she looked up and she could see the fucking sky and the

stars. She released her hands, pulling the pads away from each other, the roof stopped shuddering and she started falling.

She quickly caught herself, and slowly eased her descent back down the ground, incrementally activating and releasing until her feet touched the ground and she doubled over, that familiar nausea crashing over her from the use of her quirk. She stumbled to her feet when she was done, wiping her mouth as she walked, almost drunkenly to the hallway, to retrieve the group there- still huddled safely.

“Come on,” she said. “We’re getting out of here.”

They followed her back into the warehouse- stepping over pieces of broken concrete and twisted metal; an explosion of sighs, and cries and cracking sobs broke through the ringing in her ears. She turned to the woman who had helped her. “I’m going to send you up first,” she said, hurriedly. “And I want you to run as fast as you can and get help.”

“Got it.”

Ochako held out her hand and the woman took it without any hesitation and squeezed it. “Thank you,” she said. Ochako nodded and activated her quirk on the woman and then herself before she pushed off the ground, her arm firmly around the woman’s waist. Normally she would feel okay about sending her up alone, but she wasn’t sure about activating a safe release from down here.

And she wasn’t losing anyone else.

Not now. Not when they were so damn close.

###

Katsuki was already cranky. It was well past 9 pm and he had only just showered because Shitty Hair wouldn’t get off of his dick about helping him study. But the shouting from his peers and the blaring TV coming from the common area was about to make him completely lose his cool. He slammed the bathroom door shut and stomped toward the noise, ready to tell them to turn off the fucking T.V. and get to bed.

He turned the corner to find half of class 2-A gathered there, scattered across the floor, sitting on the couch or standing behind it, gripping it like they were watching the most suspenseful movie of their lives. His

reprimand died on his lips as he moved toward them.

“Just wait,” cried Kirishima, who was on his knees in front of the T.V, closer than was probably healthy, looking like he was about to cry. He bobbed up and down on his knees and pointed vigorously at the T.V. “I’m telling you I know what I freakin’ saw!”

Katsuki moved closer, falling in beside Shoji, who was standing behind the couch, the most stoic of the group right now, who also seemed overwhelmed with emotion. Deku was sobbing obnoxiously loud on Icy Hot’s shoulder- nothing too out of order there. But Pinky and Earjack were holding each other, and even Sero and Kaminari looked like they were a few seconds from bursting into tears.

“This is live and unfolding, folks, with police and heroes on the scene responding to what they thought was an earthquake but seems to be something much more villainous, turning this into a rescue mission here in Tottori.”

The camera from the chopper zoomed in on a huge gaping hole in the ground. Katsuki didn’t see anything at first on the slightly shaky camera footage. He saw people running around outside the hole, some collapsed in exhausted heaps, the emergency responders running around offering medical aid, but nothing that would warrant so much noise.

Katsuki leaned over the back of the couch, trying to see what Kirishima had been yelling about, what had this whole fucking class in tears. And then he saw it, two people floating just above the sinkhole and then falling downward.

“SEE!” Kirishima jumped up onto his feet and pumped his fist into the air. “See I freakin’ told you guys! I told you it was Uraraka!”

Katsuki’s grip involuntarily tightened on the back of the couch. The camera zoomed in on the pair, as one slid off of the others back.

“Fuck me...” he muttered.

It sure as fuck was Uraraka. She was blood-soaked and ragged as he had ever seen her- and there was a sharpness to her features that sure as fuck hadn’t been there a month ago, her rounded face seemingly filed down into sharp, angled edges.

But...

It was her.

The frog girl was shaking on the couch while Bird Boy awkwardly attempted to comfort her.

“She’s alive,” muttered Deku, gripping his knees tight as if it was the only thing keeping his body from shaking and flying apart. “She’s alive.”

Katsuki looked at him, annoyed, but bit back the smart-ass remark (he supposed now was not the time). But a realization dawned on him as he watched his classmates cry and breathe with relief. He had been so bothered by everyone returning to normal because the mission hadn’t been finished as far as he was concerned.

But it hit him suddenly that, for many of them, the mission had been finished. It had just finished with the worst possible outcome. It was the thing that apparently no one had wanted to say but apparently, everyone (well almost everyone) had been thinking.

They thought she was dead, he realized suddenly- feeling simultaneously like a prize idiot and the only one among them with a lick of sense.

The thought marinated for a moment in Katsuki’s head- he turned it over and examined it, trying to recast the behavior of his peers in that light, to help make sense of why they were all acting like they were witnessing a fucking miracle.

Sure, he was relieved to see her. He was relieved to know where their peer was.

But...it wasn’t a fucking miracle. She wasn’t back from the dead.

It had never occurred to Katsuki- not for a moment- that she wasn’t alive.

####

After Ochako brought up the last of the prisoners- those lucky enough to still be alive- she made one more trip down into the hole. Her last trip down, vowing that this would be the last time she ever saw this cursed place. She touched the cage that was her home for so long, or what felt like so long, now holding her still-passed out handler, removed her own weight, and then pushed back up toward the opening she had created.

He was breathing though.

In no time at all, the place was crawling with law enforcement and pros, and that was good because her left hand was completely destroyed, and she could barely stay upright on her two feet, her body, pumping full of adrenaline, was seconds away from collapsing.

She took a step forward, a few steps toward...anything. She didn't care. She looked around, they were in a field, under the harsh searchlights from helicopters. She looked over her shoulder trying to orient herself. They were outside, in a field? Her eyes drifted to the hole. They had been underground.

She stepped forward again toward anything. Emergency workers and EMTs were flooding the hostages while she tried to relish the feel of the wind on her skin, but she couldn't commit. It felt too much like something tricked from her memory- a mirage that she shouldn't trust.

She surveyed the hostages, all in various stages of damage. 17 total, plus the two who were fighting- she hoped that officers had gotten there in time to save them too. After a few more steps she became aware of the sharp poke of the dry grass beneath her feet.

"Ma'am."

Ma'am? There was no way someone called her ma'am, right? How much could that place have possibly aged her? Suddenly, there was a microphone in her face and a blinding light from a camera pointed directly into her eyes. She brought a hand up to shield her eyes from the light. She barely registered the sounds of distress from the person on the other side of the camera telling her it was her mangled left hand she had raised up, but she couldn't bring herself to care.

"Ma'am..." There were so many shouts for her attention; she blinked wildly trying to sort it all out, trying to alleviate the pounding behind her eyes clawing at her brain.

*"Can you tell us more about this rescue operation?"*

Operation? There was no operation, she just wanted out.

*"Were you undercover?"*

*"Are you a pro?"*

Did they not recognize her? She couldn't imagine that her picture

hadn't been in the news for at least a week after she went missing. How different could she possibly look?

*"How long were you there, miss?"*

Questions were lobbed at her at a mile a minute and all she could do was stare and blink dumbly at the cameras, wincing occasionally at the light and the volume. She looked down slowly at her arms, her left hand looked like it had been dipped into a vat of blood all the way to the elbow.

"Huh..." she whispered to herself. It was kind of pretty, she thought as she examined it in the light of the camera. She brought her ripped fingers up to her face to examine them more closely. They had been everything- her meal-ticket, her assurance that she would be able to provide for her family and now three of them were mangled from tip to base, pried open, emptied, and then filled with concrete and dirt.

It was weird that it didn't hurt; it looked like it should hurt, and the dissonance was dizzying.

"What's your quirk?"

"What's your name?"

God, they were so loud, everything was so bright and so loud. She needed to go...somewhere. But where was she? Was she still in Japan?

Was she even awake?

Would she wake soon and find herself in her cage?

She tried to turn away, to hide herself from the lights and the questions- tried to focus on the trillions of nerve endings that were gasping and short-circuiting, trying to find the spark of anything that would let her know that she was alive.

That she had a pulse.

But the crew moved with her, trailing her to keep her in the shot. Goddammit, it was so loud. Then she felt a hand on her shoulder- not hard- but hard enough. She lashed out and threw the arm off of her with a vicious fling of her own arm.

"Don't touch me," she shrieked, a feral voice rising inside of her as she staggered backward and out of reach- the sudden movement, igniting

the long-delayed nausea. She fell to the ground, legs awkwardly bent beneath her like she was a broken doll. She heard some yelling above her heard, surrounding her like a whirlwind. She looked up and tried to pinpoint the source, but it was pen balling everywhere above her.

She felt hands on her face, and she threw her head back out of reach as panic flooded her- filling her and replacing all of her senses at once. She tried to lash out at the people surrounding her, but her movements were weak and pathetic- her blood and energy drained. She found herself on her back suddenly and heard more yelling above her.

“Turn ‘em ahf...” she slurred. Why were there camera’s here? Who was touching her? Someone had their fingers on her pulse, and another was asking her to respond to a question. But she couldn’t because all she could hear was the chattering and shouting of people above her asking different questions.

How embarrassing.

The yelling grew louder; a lot louder, an angry voice joining the fray as she was pushed back down onto her back. She squeezed her eyes shut but the bright lights burned through her eyelids- and then, suddenly, like a cloud passing over the sun when she would take summer naps in the hammock, something obscured the light. She cracked her eyes opened and found herself in the literal shadow of someone’s wings. She looked up and saw just that- outstretched wings- creating a barricade between her and the cameras, preserving whatever dignity she had left.

A voice rang out, demanding and harsh- somewhat familiar, but she couldn’t quite place it.

“Get the hell out of here you fucking vultures!” The rest was obscured by either shouting or the blood in her ears but she caught the end. “... a fucking kid! So get your damn cameras out of here!”

She snorted, her lids growing heavy, the pulsing in her head intensifying. Heroes weren’t supposed to speak like that.

Not on camera anyway.

It was an odd last thought, but she couldn’t think on it for long because her eyes were sliding shut over her dry eyes- sending her into darkness.

# Teachers and Vultures

## Chapter Notes

\* CW Interview with law enforcement- I put that because I know post trauma, these are hard for people. But this story is, as I said, safe wish fulfillment. So while thoroughly angsty and hard for our girl, the support system is wish fulfillment, both on a friend level and on a system level. So Detective Tsukauchi does a great job :) But there is discussion of assault and violence

Also just a reminder, we are in Ochako's headspace, which is not healthy right now. So as she blames herself and those self-hating feelings rise up for her, she is actually not at fault and is not obligated to maneuver the feelings of the people around her, but I feel like she would want too.

Additionally, Ochako refers to "sex" a lot in this chapter, calling what happened to her rape only once. That is also not accurate, but as I said, her perception is also not accurate and referring to sexual assault/rape as that is hard. So just a note that when she calls it "sex" it is not actually sex, but rape/assault, but we are in her POV.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Aizawa was the first to arrive at the small hospital in Nagoya. Hawks' speed allowed him to get there several hours before him, where he met up with some of the area's local pros. Since then, the winged-hero kept Aizawa apprised of the situation and where Uraraka was relocated after the rescue.

He knew from both the news and Hawks' report that Uraraka was not the only victim. Of course, as a hero, he cared what happened to the others, where they were, and how they were doing, but as a teacher, he could care less right now about any of them. He needed to get to her, his student, as quickly as possible, to tell her parents (who would soon be on their way with an escort) that their daughter was indeed alive. That this was, in fact, Uraraka.

He hurried down the halls of the small hospital toward the room a nurse had directed him toward. He started at a jog but quickened to a run when he heard the screaming, the shouting, and the sound of objects being thrown violently in a room a few yards away.



He heard the sound of someone grunting in pain and barks of protest and pleading voices.

“Uraraka-chan...you need to calm...”

“Get away from me!”

*Shit .*

Aizawa froze in the doorway to the room. He did not often freeze; in his line of work, he could not afford to. But there was something about the sight in front of him that uniquely jarring.

Uraraka was calm as a rule. A little excitable at times, but calm and generally collected. He had seen her fierceness as her teacher, and during their summer training, she showed that she had grown leaps and bounds in manipulating her quirk. He knew she could be a powerful, frightful sight, but this was different.

So very different.

Half of the room, machines, the bed, a doctor, and a few orderlies were already on the ceiling, while another doctor hedged carefully toward Uraraka, whose body was poised in a fighting stance, her back pressed into the corner, as though she were afraid to offer it to anyone.

Her eyes were wide, but hazy, locked on the syringe in the doctor's hands.

“Don’t you stick that in me,” she commanded, her voice leaving no room for argument. “Nothing...goes inside, do you understand? I won’t let you put that thing back inside of me!”

Aizawa closed his eyes and exhaled slowly, calling on what remained of his composure before he stepped into the room.

“None of you...” she screamed, it was almost a sob, but her eyes were dry and blood-shot with not a tear to be found. “No one is putting a hand on me...I’m not...I’m not...” her sentence slurred into something unintelligible, her words interrupted by sharp staccato breathes as she clutched her left hand to her chest. It was heavily bandaged, but blood was seeping through the gauze. “I’m not...” she heaved and stumbled back into the wall. “...Not letting you put anything else inside of me.”

Her eyes slipped shut for a moment, and the doctor took that moment

to lunge toward her.

“Don’t,” Aizawa barked, running forward to intercept the doctor, but it was too late. The idiot’s sudden movement sent Uraraka into another panicked state. She leaped at the doctor, her good hand outstretched, and slammed her palm and fingers into his chest in a hard thrust that sent him flying up and into the ceiling.

He had to do something fast- this whole room was already out of control.

“Uraraka,” he said carefully, moving toward her, with his palms facing her, keeping them in her line of sight.

“We have to sedate her,” insisted the doctor, trying not to flail about from where he was pressed to the door. “She’s pulled the stitches in her hands, and we have too...”

Aizawa turned his glare on the doctor, silencing him, as he stepped toward Uraraka.

“Uraraka,” he said, his voice quiet and steady. The snarl in her face did not falter as she looked between the hospital staff floating on the roof and back to Aizawa, but he could also see that her brown eyes were dull and clouded with drugs and panic. “You’re safe here...” She let out an abrupt bitter laugh, stumbling sideways against the wall. “Your parents are coming...”

“Liar,” she screamed, her breath hitching as she struggled to breathe. “Liar...they...” she looked down at her hands, the movement causing her to sway on her feet as if the floor was rocking beneath her. “They want to...put that thing in me again...” she brought her hands back to her chest protectively. “I won’t let them!” Her eyes narrowed accusatorily on the orderlies she had floated to the ceiling.

“Uraraka,” he said, stepping closer to her. “Look at me...not them...” She shook her head, her frenzied gaze moving frantically, afraid to let any one of them out of her sight for a moment.

“It’s a trick...” she breathed, her voice cracked and brittle. “It’s a trick. I won’t...” her eyes started to slide shut, and her knees bucked beneath her, but she caught herself just in time. “I won’t let...” her head lulled to her right shoulder. “I won’t let them...put me back in there.”

She had no idea where she was, and even if she did, it was clear no

part of her was convinced that she was safe.

“Ochako,” he said, shifting to her given name. “You know me...” he took another slow step toward her, but she tensed and raised her good hand, ready to fight.

“Don’t,” she growled. “I don’t need help. I need to get out.”

Her eyes swept the room, assessing her resources, the exit, her obstacles, her opponents, all of it.

“I’m sorry,” he said, lowering his voice, hoping to ease her, but her eyes remained fixed past his shoulder and on the door. “I’m sorry, Ochako, but you can’t leave yet.”

She let out a feral cry and bolted past him toward the door.

“Uraraka, no,” he barked, reaching out to grab her, his fingers wrapped tight around her forearm with more force than he wanted to use, but he could see the blood seeping through her bandages, the long slice of a still-fresh wound across her face, and god knows what else. They needed to calm her down before she did more damage.

“Let go,” she screamed, wrenching in his hold so hard he was afraid it would pull her shoulder out of the socket. “Let go! Let go!” The heel of her bandaged hand slammed against his face as she lashed out at him wildly while her other hand reached for his arm, ready to fling him into zero gravity. “Let me go!” Her voice was ragged and desperate, nothing like the girl he knew. She kicked her heels into the hard floor, trying to pull herself free of him.

“Ochako,” he repeated, this time his voice stern, hoping that the authority there would shake out some of the cobwebs and tease out someplace of trust in her subconscious mind. “Listen to me right now...you *are* safe, but...”

She grabbed his arm and pressing all of her functioning fingers into him.

“Ochako,” he warned. “Don’t.” He felt himself lifting into the air, and she moved to shove him backward too, to send him to the ceiling like everyone else, but he easily grabbed hold of her wrist, keeping himself rooted to the ground and then opened his eyes wide. His scarf whipped out to catch the falling orderlies before they slammed into the ground as Uraraka’s quirk vanished. He swallowed the unfamiliar guilt that twisted in his gut as she looked around, somehow even more

afraid than she had looked before- somehow even paler as she groped around the room for a reason for why her quirk wasn't working.

"What...what happened?" she sobbed, holding up her hands to her face. "I took it out...I took it out...I have...I have my quirk now..." The doctors and orderlies shouldered past him before he could react, grabbing Uraraka before she could pull away. She thrashed around for a bit, trying to wrestle free, but the needle was in her arm now, and he could already see it working. Her knees buckled again, one of the doctors holding her upright.

But in a brief moment of calm, her eyes met his, and they widened slightly in recognition for a moment before they clouded with a harsh, heartbreaking look of betrayal and deep hurt.

"You..." she muttered. "You...give...give it back." A dry sob seized her word as she slumped into the doctor, her voice pleading now. "Give it back...please give it...ba..."

He blinked, releasing his stay on her quirk as she fully succumbed to the sedative- boneless and shuddering.

###

Aizawa sat slumped in the chair against the wall while Uraraka slept- not so peacefully and drug-induced. It had all happened so fast- it was still hard to believe that they had found her.

Or...well...he supposed she found them (credit where credit was due after all, and none was due him). One minute he was following a possible lead, and the next, he was getting a call that she had been found, and five hours later, he was here.

He looked down at his phone. Her parents would be here soon.

There wasn't much to be done on his part right now- really no reason for him to rush there yet. Local law enforcement was processing everyone arrested or detained on the scene. But he supposed it was the least he could do to assure her parents that someone would be there with her until they arrived.

He rubbed his eyes and stretched out his legs in front of him.

She woke up once in the night, alerting him to the fact with her pained moans. He wasn't sure if she was fully conscious until she shifted on the pillow, turning her gaze toward him.

“Sensei...” her voice was lower than he had ever heard it- raspy with sleep and medication. “Did...”

He moved in his chair. “Do you need something, Uraraka?”

She shook her head. “Did...they get...there were two, who...who were already fighting. Did they get out? Did you get there in time?”

All Might’s words came back to him, loud and blaring; the hardest thing about teaching heroes is seeing them *become* heroes, seeing them do the exact thing they are supposed to do.

“I’ll find out,” he assured. “As far as I know, there were not casualties on the scene.” She laughed, a soft bitter thing before she looked away from him, her eyes sliding shut.

###

When Ochako awoke again, it was to the muffled sound of sobbing over her head. She blinked furiously, willing herself to speak, to move, to sit up.

*Her parents.*

Was this a dream?

Were they here?

Or was she dead?

She wanted to speak, to say something, but her tongue felt thick in her mouth, and her whole body felt like it had been cut open and filled with sand. She wanted to tell them it was okay- that they didn’t need to cry- that she was safe. But she was too tired, her body and her insides ached. She was too tired.

Too damn tired.

So she just went to sleep.

###

The voices modulated above her head- frequencies changing inexplicably, falling in and out of her ears.

“Infections...”

It was like a thick layer of cotton was jammed into her ears, keeping her from hearing the conversations happening over her head.

“Malnourishment...”

She wanted out of here-to go outside, to go to school. How far behind was she now?

“Dehydration...”

She had been in her second year. Second year was important.

“...No pregnancy...”

She groaned. She didn’t want her parents to know about that- about any of it, but *especially* that. Not when it was over and done. Not when there was nothing anyone could do about it. She turned her head and groaned, trying to speak, but still, nothing clawed its way out.

###

She didn’t remember the flight home; she had been sedated, and then when she woke up, she was in a new hospital in Tokyo and feeling just a little bit more alive. She could sit up. She could talk again.

Only there was nothing she wanted to say.

Looking at her parents- the thing she thought would make her so happy and relieved, only made her sad. They looked as bad as she did (or at least how bad she assumed she looked- she actually hadn’t looked in a mirror). They looked so unsure, wanting so badly to help her.

But not being able to.

It made her feel like- somehow- she had let them down because all she could see in their eyes was guilt, tremendous, heart-breaking guilt, and the memory of how they had last seen her. And she couldn’t stand to look at it; she had no idea how to face it. She didn’t know how to fix it.

She wanted to fix this for them. But she didn’t know how.

She didn’t know how to fix anything.

###

“Ochako.” Her eyes fluttered open. “Ochako baby, do you need something?”

She groaned at the light streaking in through the window and into her eyes. It was her father’s voice, and all the same, the term of endearment made her skin crawl.

“Ochako...” her mother’s voice broke through the haze, and she leaned in toward her, crowding her. She wanted to push her away, but it was her mother. *Her mother* . Her mother, who no doubt had been in hell for the past few weeks. Ochako couldn’t push her away as she gathered her in her arms. “We are here, Ochako. We are right here. We won’t let anything happen to you.”

She wanted to pull away, to lay back down, to go back to sleep. Instead, she raised her arms, straining under the weight of them and draped them over her mother’s shoulders. She remembered her mother being soft and round and warm. Her mother felt thinner than the last time Ochako had hugged her.

“We love you, Ochako.”

Ochako let out a shaky breath and her mother held her tighter.

“Love you too, momma.”

That, at least, she knew was true.

###

After three days in her hospital, she had her first visitors besides her parents.

Detective Tsukauchi, Aizawa-Sensei (although some part of her brain seemed to recall seeing Aizawa at some point in the past few days, but she couldn’t recall when), and All-Might, though she wondered why All-Might was in the room.

Wasn’t he retired? Was he here as a representative for UA? To be a familiar face in the room? It wasn’t as if they were close. She wasn’t Deku, or Shoto, or Bakugo or any of her peers who had piqued his interest for the past year.

Her parents sat nervously at the foot of the bed. She wished it was just the detective; familiar faces in the room made her more anxious.

“Uraraka-chan,” said the detective. “We are going to ask you some questions, okay? But if you feel overwhelmed at any point, then we can stop.”

Ochako looked at him, then to Aizawa and All-Might, before she looked at Tsukauchi again.

“Are women detectives as rare as women heroes, Detective?” The question flew from her mouth before she could hold it in, like a filter was broken inside of her head. To his credit, he didn’t look phased by the question.

She wondered if the detective track was a difficult one for women. After all, only two of the top ten heroes were women. Not that she had her eyes on that. The goal had always been stability, providing a life for her parents and saving people along the way, saving heroes, if she could. She’d be lucky if they even let her be a hero at this point- what with all the killing, but even so, she had never been like Deku.

But still...even if it was too late for her, so many of her classmates could do it. Mina was fearless, Tsu was versatile, and Momo was- well- perfect. Anyone of them could make it into the top ten.

She hoped they did.

“Would you be more comfortable with a female detective, Uraraka?” Asked the detective, kindly.

“No,” she said. She didn’t really feel uncomfortable- that wasn’t the word to describe what was roiling inside of her, and she very much doubted that a female detective would make a difference in this situation. “I’d rather get this done.”

She looked down at her hands. She couldn’t remember the last time she used her quirk. Not unlike her cell, the hospital made her feel disconnected from the world and disconnected from herself- unsure of the passage of time.

“Uraraka-chan...” she looked up at again at the detective, her eyes going to the thick binder and a notebook in his lap. “Do you need more time?” She fiddled with the edges of her blanket; it was the blanket her mom had brought her from her bed at home.

“No,” she said, her voice surprisingly calm, still ragged, but calm. She wondered if that was a permanent change or some temporary alteration from lack of use- like rusted metal that sat for too long. “No.



Let's do this now."

"Okay."

She could feel eyes on her- so many eyes- probing, questioning, listening with bated breath.

So much had happened.

So many embarrassing things- it felt silly and banal and common to be embarrassed after all that had happened to her. But she was, especially with her parents in the room.

How was she supposed to say what had happened? Speak about it with them in the room?

How was she supposed to talk about that damn outfit in front of her parents?

Sure the fighting, the near-death experiences, the starvation- that was bad enough- but...how could she talk about that outfit in front of her dad?

Was that wrong?

Was that stupid?

It felt stupid.

"Momma," she said finally. "Papa..." she looked up at them, sitting vigil at her bedside, both haggard and desperate. "Can you...can I please have some privacy?"

It felt cold.

Did it sound cold to them?

Her mother tightened her grip on the edge of Ochako's blanket. Ochako looked at her and tried- hoped- to soften herself, to stir up some warmth in her voice.

"I just I...I think it would be easier for me to..." she looked away from the hurt she was sure was stirring in the eyes of her parents. "...it would just be easier for me." Beside her, she could feel her mother's body shudder as she stood.

"Of course, sweetheart..." Ochako bit back the gag reflex again; it

wasn't fair, her father always called her that, how could he know. She sure hasn't told him yet; that pet names made her want to vomit. "Whatever you need." Her father stood up behind her mother and squeezed her shoulder in solidarity.

They had been saying that a lot lately- *"whatever you need."*

She wondered if some professional at the hospital had given them the phrase. She wondered if someone in the hospital could give her an answer.

How was she supposed to know?

Her mom stood, reluctantly, and squeezed Ochako's hand as she did. God, she looked so tired- she was always a pretty woman, a vibrant woman with a youthful spring in her step, but she looked like she had aged three years since Ochako had seen her.

Ochako squeezed her fingers around her mother's in a light pressure- a pitiful offering to the woman who had worried for her since she was a baby in the womb- the woman who stood and fretted over her crib and hadn't seen her in weeks- now she was being asked to leave Ochako again.

But Ochako couldn't think about that.

She waited until they were gone and then turned to look at the detective.

"Okay," she breathed. "What do you need to know?"

She looked briefly at her teachers. All-Might was looking at her, warm and sad. Aizawa was- well, she looked away immediately- unable to account for the rage that was rearing its head in her chest at the very sight of him.

She settled for looking at Detective Tsukauchi- he had a calm, professional look, the look of someone who had done this a few times.

"Do you think you could identify a few faces for me?"

She nodded. "Sure. But I don't know any names."

"That's fine," he said, handing her a binder. "Just tell me if anyone looks familiar. There were a lot of people there when law enforcement arrived, and we are just trying to keep everyone straight."

She took the thick binder and looked down at the smooth black surface and the laminated edges sticking out. She ran her thumb over the sharp edges.

“Everyone else,” she started. “Everyone I brought out of the hole with me.” She looked up abruptly at him. “None of ‘em were there by choice, except for the one I brought out in the cell.”

“17, right?”

She nodded. “Plus, the two that were fighting.”

“Right,” he nodded. “Yes, I’ve read the interviews with some of the prisoners who were ready to talk. Some of them are still in shock, but a few were ready to speak.”

Ochako nodded, her thumb digging harder into the corner of the binder- into her still intact thumbpad. She opened the binder and looked at the first picture, a scowling man with long scraggly hair.

She shook her head and turned the page.

A younger man, handsome and unfamiliar.

She shook her head again.

“Who are they?” she asked.

“They were arrested at the site,” he said. “I imagine many escaped in the chaos, but we were able to apprehend a lot of them.”

She nodded and continued to flip through it.

“I recognize this woman,” she said. She had beautiful eyes, a proud mouth, and often arrived at fights in nicer clothes than most. “She was there three or four times that I can remember. She sticks out.”

Detective Tsukauchi nodded, and she flipped the page again.

“One of the twins,” she said, tapping the pale face and long white hair.

“Who are they?”

“Uh... they were kind of on branding duty,” she said.

“What do you mean?” the detective asked.

She shifted uncomfortably, her insides cringing. “She and her sister cleaned us up- did our...our costumes, makeup, all of that. Made sure we looked the part.” He nodded, Ochako adamantly stared down at her hands, willing her teachers out of the room with everything inside of her in some attempt to maintain whatever feeble dignity she still had.

“Do you know anything else about their role in the enterprise there?”

She shook her head. “No...Though I can’t...I don’t know if they were there willingly or not. A lot of us weren’t...weren’t given a lot of choices, and I don’t know if they were.”

She continued to flip.

“This was one of the men who tried to abduct Tsu,” she said. “I didn’t see him again after that, though.”

She flipped past face after face- cold, smiling, sneering, old, young, men, women- people she would pass on the street and not think anything of it. She froze suddenly on one of the pictures.

Familiar eyes, a familiar sneer, a familiar smell, all hurrying the ghost of hands over her skin.

“This...uh...he was a regular,” her voiced scratched in her throat.

“A regular spectator,” he asked. “As in he regularly came to bet on the fights?”

“Yeah,” she said with a brief nod. “And...” she exhaled and rolled her neck back and forth tiredly.

“Uraraka...if you need a break, then...”

Aizawa’s voice brought her head snapping back up aggressively. “I’m fine,” she said, her voice tight. If *he* needed a break, then he could leave. “Detective,” she said, looking back at Tsukauchi. “What is the point of all of this? Is it for criminal charges?”

“That’s part of it,” he said. “We also want to get a full picture of what was going on to find out if this is happening anywhere else, if it’s bigger than just this one place or if it’s a global network.”

She closed her eyes and nodded, letting out a shaky breath. “There were...” she willed the hot, flush of red away from her cheeks. “I’m

sorry,” she breathed out.

“It’s fine,” said Tsukuachi. “We’re in no rush, take your time.”

She felt sick but she swallowed back the bile- the last thing she wanted to do was vomit all over her bed in front of her teachers and a stranger.

“There were some who also paid for extra time with us...the fighters, I mean...” she kept her eyes firmly locked on the wall just past the detective, unable to make any kind of eye contact.

“I’m sorry, Uraraka,” said the detective, leaning in closer, his pen stalled over his notebook. “While details are not necessary, specifics are helpful for corroborations.”

“I...” her voice squeaked out, her skin on fire. “Extra time as in...as in...sex or r-rape or...trafficking...I’m not sure what the official word you would use. They just paid extra for it- it was a whole...” she looked down at the picture in her lap. “Thing.”

“All right,” said the detective. “That’s helpful to know.” The steadiness in his voice was comforting, not over or under-reacting- a good voice for things like this she supposed, man or woman. “If anyone else in the binder participated in that, please let me know.”

She nodded and exhaled slowly. She could this. She could do this.

She pointed at familiar faces and skipped others.

Stranger.

A regular.

A regular.

Stranger.

Her voice moved from tight and uncertain, to almost casual. She could feel the tension growing in the room, discomfort settling just to her right. She paused on one picture, her heart stuttering in her chest.

“This...this was the man I saw the most,” she said, looking up at the detective. “He was our guard or escort or whatever- he talked about a boss sometimes, but I have no idea who he could be talking about.”

“And this was the one you subdued in your escape?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“That’s helpful,” he said, jotting down notes. She waited in silence for him to finish before she flipped to the next picture. She chanced a glance to her right. All-Might looked emotional, but that wasn’t new. If anything, it reminded her of Deku.

Aizawa was staring aimlessly at the wall- like her parents- he looked aged a good ten years since the last time she had seen him.

“Can you tell us how you escaped?” asked the detective, drawing her attention back to him. She licked her dry lips and cleared her throat- she hadn’t spoken this much in a long time, and it was beginning to wear on her throat.

“Yeah. I uh...I don’t know what you already know, so if I’m repeating something...”

“It doesn’t matter what we already know,” he said. “Just tell us as much of the events as you remember it.”

“Right.” *As she remembered it* . As if she would ever forget any of it. “They suppressed our quirks with these weird implants. My handler messed up and freaked out when I hurt my hand, so I took a guess and thought maybe- maybe- that was where mine was.” She carefully wiggled her fingers- three of them wrapped tightly in gauze, protecting the healing skin. Apparently, she had surgery somewhere in the past few days to fix her hand. She couldn’t remember that, on account of being knocked out, and she could barely feel it on account of the medicine they had pumped her full of. She smirked and let out a sad laugh. “Only took me three guesses,” she added, wiggling the three wrapped fingers. “So, I had a tactical advantage when he came to get me out of my cell, and the element of surprise because he thought I was still quirkless. He was fairly easy to subdue after that and then I just used my quirk to bring down the ceiling in the warehouse.”

Lucky. She supposed that was the best word, but it still didn’t feel right.

“All right,” he said, scribbling in his notebook. “I just have a few more questions,” he said. “My understanding is that the quirked captives were forced to fight to the death, correct?”

She felt an uncomfortable tightness wind up in her chest, pushing out any space for air.

*To the death.*

She had never seen anyone die before then, and now- she ended lives. The closet she had ever come was to holding Sir Nighteye in her arms. But now she had seen it over and over again.

She had ended lives.

She wasn't a hero anymore.

There was blood all over her hands.

And they- all of them- knew it.

She didn't notice she wasn't breathing anymore until she heard muffled shuffling beside her, the sound of chairs scraping on the floor and a hand on her back.

"It's all right, young Uraraka," said All-Might. "Can you take a deep breath?"

"Okay," said Aizawa from somewhere above her. "I think we should stop for now..."

She shook her head and gripped her thighs, focusing all of her energy on staying upright- on siphoning air through the ever-tightening space of her throat and into her lungs. She wanted to do this now and then forget about it forever. She wanted to do this and then leave it all behind her.

She could be that girl again- the happy and laughy girl- the bubbling girl who wanted to be a hero. She just needed to get this out of the way.

"I'm fine," she heaved. "I'm fine..." she gritted her teeth and looked up, her vision was swimming slightly, but she steadied her eyes back on the detective. "What...I'm sorry...what was the question?"

He regarded her for a moment, closely, as if considering Aizawa's recommendation that they stop before he spoke again.

"If they suppressed your quirk, how did you fight?"

"I don't know the science of it, but they had some way of turning the suppressant on and off again, like a...like a shock collar or something. They controlled our quirks, we didn't." She felt a sudden violent burst of emotion. It had been her only weapon and they took it. They

burrowed into her body and took it away from her, and the thought made her blood boil. It was one of many violations but that one- for some reason- stoked her rage. It had been hers, and she had loved it.

And they made it something else.

“I took it out, and that’s how I escaped.”

She thought it best to leave out her less than heroic relishing of slamming her handlers’ face into the dirt.

“Uraraka...” She looked at All-Might.

“Yes, sir?”

“I read the reports and saw pictures of the site, is that level of power normal for your quirk?”

She had forgotten about that.

“No,” she said. “I think messing up my finger pads did something to my quirk. I was...I could make things float still but also...the opposite somehow.”

“You increased the pull of gravity?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“We’ll have a quirk specialist come and look at that later,” said Aizawa. “Is there anything else, detective?”

Ochako looked at him, lingering for the first time, trying to sort out why every word from her teacher- one she so deeply respected- made her so blindingly angry.

“You look tired, Sensei...”

He turned his eyes on her- more red than white now from sleepless nights.

“I always look tired.”

“True,” she said. “But still- you’ve been here for a long time now, and you seem mighty eager for all this to end. You don’t have to stay.”

There was a brief moment of tense silence as if he was waiting on her to say more, as if he wanted her too. But she waited too- holding his



gaze in some test that she didn't even know why she was administering.

"If that's what you want," he said finally, moving to stand. A pang of guilt rose unbidden in her chest. He didn't sound hurt or even surprised, all the while she had no idea why she had singled Aizawa out to be the recipient of her wrath.

"No," she said. "What I really want is to get out of here and get back to school."

For the first time, she saw a clear response from Aizawa, confusion, and surprise.

"What?" she snapped, trying to sound defensive, but she wasn't sure she had effectively hidden the desperation there. "I...I can still go to school, right?"

Aizawa's brows furrowed and he looked from All-Might and back to Ochako. "I...I don't know."

She straightened up in her bed and glared at him. "What do you not know," she said. "Am I expelled for..." for what? All the murder and sex? Probably.

"Of course not," said All-Might hurriedly. "You are, of course, welcome to come back to UA, but we will need to talk to your parents, perhaps at the start of next year..."

"NO!" She surprised herself with the force of her shout. No...no...no... "I can't miss my whole second year!" She looked frantically between her two teachers, fear making her a tad hysterical. "I'll be a whole year behind. I can't...I can't afford that. I need too..."

Get stronger.

Faster.

Make sure that old Ochako, who had been so utterly useless when she-when Li- needed her most- to be...

She didn't know, but something had to happen. She couldn't just sit around on her hands. She needed to make up for her failures.

Make it up to Li.

"Please," she whispered. "I need to go back."

A weighted silence hung over their heads for a moment before Aizawa broke it. "You need to prioritize your health right now."

"I'm fine," she said, her voice cracked as if it couldn't quite bear the weight of that particular lie. She swallowed and tried to steady her voice, to soften her features, to look something like a hero-in-training, something like the girl they knew. "Please..." she said. "Please, if my parents say it's okay, please tell me there's still a place for me at UA."

Aizawa looked away, and All-Might's jaw clenched with an emotion she couldn't place.

"Your place there was never in danger, Uraraka," he said wearily. "But there's no reason to rush. It's okay to take time to consider if this is still..."

Her eyes flashed dangerously, and she slammed her good hand into the mattress gripping it tightly. "Would you say that to Deku?" she bit, her voice quaking with rage. "Did you say that to him after the fiftieth time he broke his arm, or to Bakugo after he was kidnapped, or to Iida after he tried to take down Stain by himself?"

Her voice was harsh and poking, spoiling for a fight she wasn't sure she really wanted, but, clearly, some part of her did. He sat beside her, unphased by either her tone or her words.

"If any of them had been through anything remotely similar to this," he said, voice low and measured. "I promise you that I would."

She wasn't buying it. She turned toward the detective again.

"Anything else?"

"Not for now," he said, standing up. "But I may follow up on more details later, but I have your parents' contact information if that's the case."

She nodded and watched in silence as he prepared to leave. "Can I ask you something," she said. He paused and turned to her, giving her his attention. "How much...how public is this? How much does everyone know?"

Did all of her teachers know?

Did her peers know?

Did the random guy on the street know the most intimate details of her life now?

“There were reporters on the scene...”

“I know,” she said, she did remember that.

“Your face was prominently featured, but the details of what happened are a part of the investigation, and it’s ongoing. We will do everything we can to keep it under wraps for as long as we can.”

She nodded and sunk back into her pillow, exhaustion suddenly taking hold.

“You saved a lot of people, Uraraka-chan,” he said. She opened her eyes; the detective was looking at her, kind, and assuring. “You were a real hero.”

She swallowed hard- shame catching her ribs like a fishhook creating a painful sensation when she breathed

She killed people.

She wanted other dead.

She had failed Li.

She didn’t deserve praise. She deserved...something else.

“Thank- you,” she said.

The three men moved to leave, and she was ready to sink into her bed, her energy wholly depleted, her skin still burning from lingering embarrassment at the fact that her teachers now knew more than ever would have wanted them to know about her.

She shuddered and moved to stand up, to go to the window and let in a little cool air. She was unsteady on her feet from the medications still pumping through her blood- she was eager to be done with those.

She opened the window and braced herself against the frame, letting the wind whip at her face. Then she caught sight of it. A news van.

A few of them, in fact.

What the hell?

She squinted down. Why were they there?

When Aizawa and All-Might stepped through the sliding doors they were swarmed immediately. She scrunched her face and moved to her bed and fumbled one-handedly with the remote control as she flipped through the channels until she saw the name printed on the news van.

“...Eraserhead, All-Might- can you give us any updates about the UA student who was abducted?”

“No,” said Aizawa coldly.

“Are there any updates on the investigation?”

“How is UA responding too...”

A flurry of questions- some pointed in a way that stoked the simmering rage in her belly. She was pissed as hell at Aizawa- for some unknown reason that she was waiting to discover- but he was still her sensei. He was still a pro, and UA was still her school.

And she could hear the implications of their questions- story-worthy accusations laced into their words. She knew they were different reporters than the ones who had been there when she had pulled herself out of the hole, but she remembered standing outside, exhausted and broken with questions and lights flitting around her head.

Vultures.

They asked questions about her. She had been missing- reported missing- so of course, they knew who she was, and they pretended to sound concerned as they pressed her teachers. As if any of them cared about her even a fraction of what Aizawa did.

“This is the second student UA has seen kidnapped in as many years,” said a reporter.

“Is there a question?” asked Aizawa lazily.

Ochako scoffed and moved to the door, slumping heavily against it, her sleep aids making her feel as though she were slogging through a thick bog. But each step down the hallways made her feel a bit more confident and steadier.

“Ochako! Where are you...”

She passed her parents who looked pale and ashen with worry. “You shouldn’t be moving yet, you...”

“One sec, momma,” she said. “Be right back, I promise...”

She hurried down the hall, following the exit signs to the lobby. She stood for a moment, glaring at the glass doors. She was spitting mad and she was giving herself over to it, fully.

It felt good.

She wanted to be angry- to feel that burn, to feel that spark. She stomped over and through the glass doors.

“...Is it possible that UA faculty perhaps should not be trusted with the lives of children? Eraserhead, your students in particular find themselves in deadly situations more often than one would...”

“Hey,” she barked, drawing the attention momentarily from Aizawa. At first, no one paid attention to her- she was short and easily looked over, but then came the double-take as people recognized her. She shoved her way past her two teachers, scowling at the reporters.

Like hell, she’d stand there and let them insult her school on television, insult her teachers and her peers.

In “defense of her.”

No way.

Her skin prickled with excitement at the chance to raise her voice without the guilt that had accompanied her rage the past few times she felt it stir inside of her.

“...Does it concern you that UA has done nothing to remove the faculty responsible for...?”

A sneer crawled into her lips- unfamiliar and new.

“I have one thing to say about what concerns me,” she said, her voice shaking.

“Uraraka-chan,” whispered All-Might. “This isn’t necessary. Aizawa and I can take care of...”

She ignored him and raised her eyes toward the encroaching press. “What concerns me is any of you pretending you care about my

progress more than any of my teachers at UA. And as far as UA being at fault.” Her fists clenched tightly at her side; she could feel the tug of pain in her left hand and relaxed it slightly. “I was targeted because I had a quirk. It could have been anyone. I survived, I escaped, because of what I learned at UA, and because of what Aizawa-sensei taught me.” She kept her eyes forward, not trusting herself to look at her tired teacher- one glance at him and people would think she was lying. But despite what she was feeling for her teacher right now, she wouldn’t let him be tarred and feathered by a media that didn’t give one crap about her. “So does that clear up my answer to any of your stupid questions.”

Another flurry of questions came hurtling toward her, but she was done here. That was the only record she wanted to set straight and she would rather it replace the last footage of her, frantic and crazed and bleeding.

She turned and walked back into the hospital, not sparing a second look at anyone else. She was tired and she wasn’t sure if she could stand upright much longer and like hell, she was going to pass out on camera- not again.

No thank-you.

###

“No! Absolutely not.”

Ochako was not surprised to hear her mother’s swift and harsh reaction when she brought up returning to school. When she had mentioned it to her teachers, she had seen the surprise in his face, and she couldn’t help but imagine the earful that they had gotten from her parents. It seemed going back to school was not on the table for a few people.

But she was not about to hear it.

No.

Not in a million years.

“Your mother is right, sweet pea,” said her father. “We just got you back. And it was at that school that...” His words trembled, shattered, and her mother paced around the room, rubbing her shoulders and crying.

This...this was precisely why she had to go back to school. Why she couldn't go home.

It would be like this for so long- desperate and sad. They would be rightfully clingy in a way that made Ochako feel like she couldn't breathe. How long would it be before they could look at her without being reminded; without thinking about what happened?

It was too much.

Too much of no one knowing what to do.

Too much of not knowing how to feel better.

She could feel the anxiety coming off of them in waves, and it made her feel guilty.

"What should I do?" she asked, trying to keep her voice even and reasonable.

"Come home," her father said. He reached out to her, almost on instinct- only to retract his hand immediately, clenching it at his side. "Come home..." she could see the tears swimming in his eyes. He had always been her rock. Their rock. A steady, giant of a man. And here he was shattering in front of her. "Come home and be with us."

"And do what?" she asked, frustration in her voice. "Just sit around the house and do nothing?"

"No," he said. "Rest and get better."

Ochako let out a frustrated growl. "You keep saying that," she said, looking up at the ceiling. "I don't...I don't know what that means. My hand will be healed soon." She knew that was not what they were talking about- she knew.

"Baby," her father said. "Please just..."

"Ochako," she corrected, almost a knee-jerk reaction- likely harder than was necessary. "Ochako not..."

"Ochako," her father hurriedly amended. "Ochako, come home. You can go to regular school, and maybe in a year, we can talk about sending you back to UA."

"They weren't targeting heroes," she snapped, clutching her blanket tightly. "They targeted people with quirks." She waited for her mother

to stop pacing. “Why is everyone making this about UA?”

She knew that too. But she didn’t care. She’ll say anything at this point to avoid going home for the rest of the year. “I was a hero,” she said, trying to believe it herself, trying to sound as convincing as she could. “I was a hero. I saved people.”

“I don’t care about them!” Her mother screamed, suddenly, making her jump, as she grabbed the foot of Ochako’s bed. She was usually such a sweet, soft-spoken person. “I don’t care...” her father moved toward his wife as she began to sob again.

Ochako felt the same urgent, frantic desire to run- to get out. She didn’t want them to look at her anymore- to talk to her- not until they had time to put this behind them, not until they could be in the same room together without being crushed by how much she had let them down.

“We...we are so proud of you, Ochako,” her father interjected quickly, his tears stayed by pure force of will. “You can’t...please understand... you can’t ask us to let you go again.”

Ochako’s heart- whatever was left of it- cracked.

She was being selfish; she knew that. She was being a brat. She should smile at them- tell them that she will, of course, go home- go to school, help with the family business. That was what she had always wanted anyway, right?

Safe. Certain. Close.

Nothing bad would happen to her in their small farm town. She could be happy there.

Maybe.

Except she knew she couldn’t.

As much as she wasn’t really a hero anymore, she also knew she wasn’t the Ochako who ran around barefoot, chasing chickens and helping her father at a construction site.

She wasn’t her anymore. At least not yet. But if she got distance, allowed room for them all to forget what had happened just a little, maybe she could be her again. But something felt so wrong inside of her right now- like a broken piece that was rubbing against her



insides- not quite completely out of place but with a splintered edge that was enough to irritate her whole being.

“Please...” she said. “Please. I’m already so far behind. I...”

Can’t be weak.

Have to be stronger.

Have to be faster.

Have to feel different- feel anything that wasn’t this.

“Please,” she whispered, shoving the truth down her throat. “It’s my dream. They...They took so much from me...” the cheesy, after-school special lie felt thick and syrupy on her tongue, but it was her hail Mary, her last-ditch effort. “I don’t want to lose this too...” *as if there was anything left to lose* . “I want to be a hero.” *As if she could ever- really- be a hero* . “Please don’t let them take this away from me.”

She could see it- the moment her parent’s resolve began to crumble. It was a cheap trick- the way she made her voice tremble, but that lie was easier than the truth. The truth that she both wanted to return to that old Ochako and destroy her completely by becoming stronger than she ever was, the truth that she couldn’t go home and look them in the eye every day. That truth hurt too much.

Her mother sat on the edge of her bed and put a trembling hand on her ankle. She could see the war in her eyes as she looked from Ochako to her father.

“I...We’ll think about it,” she said finally, her shoulders slumping in as she wilted in on herself. Ochako exhaled slowly as the chance to go back to school was slid onto the table again. Ochako tentatively raised her arms to her parents. Her first time initiating physical contact with them.

“Thank you,” she whispered. They moved toward her, taking her into a hug, their arms resting soft around her. She knew they were purposely holding themselves back from sweeping her up and holding her tight, the way they wanted, the way that had been natural for the past sixteen years.

“We love you so much,” her father whispered into her hair. “So...so much...”

That, she knew was true.

One true thing that was real as she struggled to mine her way through whatever it was that she was supposed to be feeling.

## Chapter End Notes

Okay, thanks for staying with me :) I know it's a lot of Ochako, which is the case for a lot of the story, but next chapter the rest of the class show up! It's a slower build, and while Kacchako is end game, I wanted something slower and more realistic. I've read plenty of hurt/comfort where it is that quick moment of healing and love and romance (which i think is a valid fictitious relationship to explore) it's just not where I'm going.

Thanks so much for reading. This has been really good for me to write, and externalizing my own emotions in a safe world where i get to say what happens- so thank you again for all the love and support.

# Negotiations

## Chapter Summary

A few friends make a visit.

CW\* Nothing intense- but again just a reminder that Ochako's internal monologue is not meant to be entirely healthy- the self-hate and the "wanting to run" that expresses are not meant to be indications of anything other than her unhealthy mental state.

“Absolutely not...”

Katsuki was busy- very fucking busy.

Training. Studying. Training. Eating. Sleeping. Class. Training.

It kept him a very busy man! So he was steadfastly ignoring the red-head on the couch beside him who dared interrupt his studies.

“Come on, man,” urged Shitty Hair.

“And why the hell would I?” he asked, eyes fixed on his book.

“Because she’s our classmate.”

“And?”

“And she would come see you.”

“Tch...not my problem,” he grumbled, restarting the paragraph.

“Because it’s nice?”

He slammed his book shut- clearly, the lobby had been a mistake. “Frankly, I’m *embarrassed* that you think that would be a reason.”

“Come on! Mina and me are going!”

“Is that supposed to entice me,” he snarled. “And why the fuck are you going? You’re not even her friend.”

“Just because you’re not her friend doesn’t mean I’m not,” Shitty Hair countered with a bit more force than he typically used when talking to Katsuki, or to anyone. “She’s a cool girl- everyone likes her. She’s chill and...”

Katsuki ignored the comment. Chill. He saw that fucking footage, both at the site and at the hospital. She had looked...well, "chill" was not the first word that came to mind.

"Why are you acting like this isn't a big deal?" asked Kirishima.  
"Everyone thought she was..."

Katsuki felt an inexplicable, slightly disturbing lick of frustration in his chest. "*You all* thought," he snapped, pointing at Kirishima. "You all thought she was." He moved to start gathering his stuff off of the couch, to get out of there. "I never did."

He muttered the last bit under his breath.

"Right," said Kirishima, thoughtfully, slowly. "Not so frail, huh?" Katsuki didn't dignify the comment with a response. "Well," continued Kirishima. "Midoriya said he texted her and she's allowed to have visitors now. So we are going tomorrow."

"Then do that," he barked. "And get off my dick about it."

Kirishima stood up, finally.

"All right, man," he said. "Text if you change your mind."

"Tch..."

Kirishima made his way around the couch and toward the elevator, finally leaving Katsuki alone. Freedom from that idiot's blathering was almost in reach when Katsuki shot himself in the foot and turned to look over his shoulder.

"Oi," he called before he had time to think better of it. "Make fucking sure she wants visitors."

He looked fixedly back down at his book; he didn't have to look up to know Kirishima was looking at him. "Come on," he said. "It's Uraraka. Of course, she wants to see us."

It wasn't a stretch. Kirishima was right. She was probably one of the most universally liked people in their class, as far as he knew she didn't have beef with a single person at the school. But still...

"Just..." he growled and gripped his pen tight. "Just make sure it's what she wants and not just what you assholes want." He settled back into the couch and opened his book again. Maybe now he'd get a

moment's peace and quiet.

"Insightful, Bakubro."

"Just common fucking sense, Shitty Hair." Kirishima nodded and finally left the room. He tried to refocus his thoughts, but suddenly they went back to that shaky footage- to the way she held herself, standing in front of Aizawa and All-Might like she wasn't 5'1".

She had been almost unrecognizable- a creature of shaking rage- not too far off from him when he was muzzled and restrained. He wasn't sure the "it's Uraraka" reasoning was going to cut it.

###

Ochako felt nervous.

Not afraid, not angry, but nervous. Like she was about to take an exam. It was odd and a little unfamiliar right now.

She had told Deku that she could have visitors when he asked because, well, she didn't want to lie explicitly. And, of course, he's Deku- the sweetest human to ever walk the earth- so he told her that he wanted to see her.

And she's Ochako- he's her friend so why would she say no? And if she wanted to go back, if she wanted to prove that she could do this- she would start now. So she plastered a smile on her face and asked her mom if friends from school could come visit; maybe if they saw her like this, excited and lively about her peers, they would be more amenable to the idea of sending her back.

But now, as she waited, she was nervous.

Anxious.

She looked down at her phone- they would be here soon.

**Deku: We'll be there in 5! So excited to see you!**

She didn't ask who "we" was and panic seized her in that moment. Shit. This was a bad idea. She wasn't herself yet- she would just disappoint them right now. She swallowed and hurried to her feet- finally able to walk without swaying- her medication and sedatives low enough to no longer impair her motor functions. She crossed the room toward the small bathroom. She hadn't really looked at herself

yet; she had caught glimpses here and there, but she had not wanted to look closely. She gripped the edge of the sink, girding herself before slowly looking up at her reflection.

Now, Ochako did not consider herself a vain girl in general. She couldn't afford to be, but she couldn't help the sharp intake of breath as she looked herself dead in the eyes for the first time in a month and a half. One hand went to her mouth to stifle the short, dry sob as a sudden dissonance took her.

This was a mistake.

Her eyes started to water.

Her eyes. They had always been big and round, but they had matched her face, also round and full. But now her face was sunken and hollowed out, sharp and angled, accentuating her still big eyes- now far too large for her face, now dull and sensitive to the light. The pink was gone from her cheeks, her skin pallid and deprived of sun, air, and nourishment. And she could see the lack of it etched in her skin.

She had been hungry so much over the past few weeks- hungrier than she had ever been in her life. And while the pain of it changed into a constant, dull thud as opposed to a painful stab in her sides- it was always there, and she could see the impact of that as well.

She touched her face gingerly- as if testing to see if it was still her- to see her reflection respond with her movement.

It did.

She closed her eyes and ran the cold water hurriedly, splashing it onto her face, trying to shake off the disturbing disconnect. She patted her face gently- it didn't really help. If anything, the bright purple beneath her eyes and on her brow was even more pronounced.

At least the long cut that carved a path down the side of her face was no longer actively bleeding and was on the way to healing.

It seemed silly that she would care about something so trivial. But she wasn't stoked about a permanent scar on her face.

She heard a ding from her phone.

Shit.

She ran her fingers through her hair- it had been washed last night, but had almost completely lost all of its bounce and sheen. Now it fell in scraggly unkempt pieces around her face. But there was nothing she could do about that. She hurried back to the bed, or...maybe...she should sit in her chair, or maybe stand?

She wondered what looked less sickly.

She opted for sitting cross-legged at the head of the bed. Blanket? No blanket? Blanket covering her made her feel weird, like an invalid. But all the same, she decided yes to the blanket. She was cold, after all.

Cold all the time, she felt like.

She exhaled slowly and looked down at her phone. It was just Deku and a few other friends.

"You can do this, Ochako," she whispered to the empty room. She looked down at her white t-shirt, making sure it was clean. She took a sip of water and waited.

Waited.

Waited.

Did she look like she was waiting? Should she smile, or would that look weird? She hadn't smiled in a while, and she wasn't sure how to smile with this new face, without her cheeks- they had always been half her smile.

Maybe if she...

"Uraraka!"

Her eyes widened, for some reason opting for deer in the headlights over a smile as a blur of green-hair moved toward her. He was running- eyes wide with tears and a smile as bright as the sun. Her heart rate spiked as he got closer, but she couldn't bring herself to say no to him. He was so good and so kind.

But her eyes slammed shut, and she held her breath, fighting her body's instinct to run or fight or shrink in on itself away from his outstretched arms.

It was stupid; she shouldn't be afraid. He's...

He stopped about a foot away from her bed- stalled by something. Her brow furrowed, and she cracked her eye open, willing her body out of her inevitable panic that came with arms around her. She knew Deku was not alone, but she had forgotten that for a moment. Todoroki was on his right, and his fingers were lightly curled over Deku's forearm, urging him back.

Deku looked from Todoroki to Ochako. She tried to relax, to smile at him, to release the tightness in his shoulders and let out her held exhale. But he no doubt caught sight of it. She reached out to him; he took her hand eagerly in both his scarred ones and brushed his thumb over her knuckles affectionately.

"Uraraka," he breathed. "I'm so so happy to see you."

"You too," she said, squeezing his hand before loosening her grip.

"I'm glad to see you again, too," Todoroki interjected, but he kept his hands to himself and stood slightly away from the bed.

"Thank you, Shoto," she said. "Thank you for coming to see me."

She craned her neck to look behind the two boys to see a larger group gathered at the door. Mina and Tsu walked in first, with the latter looking very much on the verge of tears. But behind them, there were two more, and they were a surprise. Well, Kirishima wasn't a surprise- he was always nice to her, he was nice to everyone. They were friends. But the surly blonde at his side was a absolutely a surprise.

It wasn't that she didn't like Bakugo. She had a tremendous amount of respect for the hero, admired his drive and his strength. More than once, she found him to be the voice in her head, kicking her ass and telling her to get up. They understood each other, but...but he wasn't a come-across-town-and-visit-her-in-the-hospital kind of friend. Yet here he was, lingering by the door, gripping the messenger bag on his shoulder, looking around the room distractedly, as if he was searching for something. Maybe searching for the reason he was here, she wondered.

She almost forgot her anxiety, the odd mix of her classmates proving a compelling distraction. Mina and Tsu pushed closer. Ochako shuffled slightly, making room for both of them to sit on her bed, pressing herself further into the plastic headboard.

Before she sat, Mina held out a vase toward Ochako.



“Ochako,” she said with a bright smile. “We missed you so much!” But Mina’s smile faltered slightly as Ochako reached out toward the vase, her eyes falling to Ochako’s hand, long stripes of stitches going up and down from fingers to her palm. They had taken the gauze off of her left hand to let it breathe, and it was healing nicely. But she supposed it still looked a little disturbing.

“It’s fine, Mina,” she said, taking the vase and smiling. She set it down in her lap and held up her palm, wiggling her digits at her. “See...the doc says they are healing fine.” She looked down at the flowers in her lap, at the card sticking out of it; the names of her classmates scrawled across it, some even leaving little messages.

“Thank you,” she said, nodding at Mina. “They’re so colorful!”

Mina smiled. “I made sure the pink matches your uniform.”

Ochako looked down at the flowers.

She supposed it did.

She’d need a new uniform; she doubted very much that her old one would fit her. She brushed her thumb over one of the soft petals.

“They are really beautiful,” she said.

A sudden burst of tears almost made her spill the vase in her own lap, had Deku not caught it quickly, and moved it to her bedside table. Ochako’s eyes fell on Tsu. The girl hadn’t spoken yet. Tsu was one of her closest friends. But Ochako felt vaguely like she did with her parents- Tsu was too close to her. And the minute Ochako looked at her friend, she felt that same trembling guilt, the desire to smile, to assure her that everything would be okay.

“Tsu...” she whispered, leaning toward her friend. Ochako looked around the room for someone, anyone, to step in and comfort her. “Tsu, what’s wrong why...”

Another shuddering sob went through the usually emotionally-balanced girl.

This was a mistake.

They shouldn’t be here.

She wasn’t ready for this.

She should have waited until she was less upsetting to look at.

“Ochako,” Tsu whispered, taking her hand. “I’m so sorry... this is...it’s my fault...”

Shit. Someone say something. She looked around again, but everyone was looking on emotionally, except for Todoroki, who looked confused by the whole display, and Bakugo, whose eyes were narrowed, almost annoyed.

“Uh Tsu...” she said, tugging her friend closer. “It’s not...it’s not your fault.”

“It is...” she whimpered. “It was...you saved me, and now you’re hurt and I...” a sad little ribbit caught in her throat. And everyone was just standing there, watching.

Bakugo still looked annoyed.

What did he want her to do about it?

“Tsu...” she finally said, pulling Tsu closer so that she was sitting on the bed. She could feel all eyes on her, expecting...something...she just didn’t know what.

What were they expecting?

Something cathartic? Inspiring? She was a hero, after all. She could do that. Ochako patted Tsu’s head awkwardly.

“Don’t apologize, Tsu,” she said with a slight laugh of casual dismissal. “It wasn’t anyone’s fault.” The hell it wasn’t, but certainly not Tsu’s- it had honestly never occurred to her that Tsu would feel guilty about this. It was normal in their class to end up in the line of fire on behalf of someone else. “You woulda done the same for me. And I’m not so bad hurt. Just a little banged up, you know.”

Tsu threw herself onto Ochako, and she froze immediately when the girl’s arms closed around her. She squeezed her eyes shut.

*It was just Tsu , she thought to herself. It was just Tsu. Small, innocent, crying Tsu. Her friend, Tsu.*

She exhaled, trying to pry away the fear seizing her body. She looked up at the ceiling as she wrapped an arm around Tsu, trying to keep the tremor at bay. Thankfully, no one was looking at that. They were

all too caught up in the stirring, emotional moment- apparently.

Even Kirishima was welling up.

Bakugo, for some reason, was scowling, and she, once again, wondered what the hell he was doing here if it was so upsetting for him. It sure as hell wasn't a picnic for her either.

"All right, idiots," he barked suddenly. "We gotta be back in an hour, so get all your chit-chat out now because I'm keeping track."

"Kacchan," whispered Deku, not quite a scold but his version of it. "You don't need..."

"I ain't missing combat training because you all wasted your time crying instead of talking- we are down ten minutes, so keep it moving, froggy."

"Dude," scolded Kirishima. "Are you serious right now?"

"No," said Ochako, using the moment to detangle herself from Tsu and hand her a box of tissue. Anything to move on, and Bakugo's outburst had proven just the detour. Though she did let Tsu remain on the bed with her. "Bakugo's right! I want to hear how second-year is going."

She turned and grinned at the redhead. "Kirishima," she said, scooting further up the bed to make space for him to sit beside Mina. "Come on!" His grin somehow grew, so friendly and unassuming, as he sat at the end of the bed.

It felt- kinda normal.

"What's happening at school?" she asked.

She could do this.

She could listen as her friends excitedly told her about their new classes, their teachers. Classes she had the chance to attend three times before everything happened.

She could listen, nod, and smile.

But every moment felt like she was stomping herself down to stay put in her body; some part of her wanting to run and hide or yell because she had missed too much. She'd never catch up; every minute she spent in this bed meant another minute of getting weaker.

“When will you be back?”

She jolted back to the conversation. “Oh, huh...” she shook her head. “I’m working on that.”

“What do you mean?” asked Deku, eyes still fixed on her like he was afraid she would disappear again if he were to blink.

“Oh, just that my parents are a little...hesitant. I’ll have to negotiate them down to even come back this semester.”

“That makes sense,” said Todoroki. “They didn’t know where you were for a month and a half, most parents...” Ochako couldn’t see the look that Deku was giving Todoroki over his shoulder, but it made Todoroki’s mouth close. The heterochromatic hero looked from Ochako to Deku, confused about what he had done.

“Oh no,” she said dismissively. “It’s fine. And it’s true.” She sighed and looked at them forlornly. “But I think I can talk them into two weeks. Much more than that, and I’ll go fucking crazy...”

Mina’s eyes went wide, and Deku let out a startled noise.

“Oh,” she covered her mouth with her hands. “Sorry,” she said. “It just...” it slipped out. Her language had gotten much saltier over the last few weeks, but most of it had stayed an internal monologue- a means to stir herself into action or work herself up into some kind of emotion.

“Don’t sweat it, Uraraka,” said Kirishima with a laugh. “You got a ways to go before you catch up with this guys...” he gestured over his shoulder at Bakugo, who was still standing off to the side- listening and watching without any input. Like some kind of weird lurker. “Oh man, do you think you’ll be back in time for the Sports Festival?”

She had forgotten all about that, and for some reason, she has no idea why in the moment, that makes her suddenly very emotional. She had forgotten how much she was looking forward to that- she had trained so hard over the summer in part with the Sports Festival in mind. She hadn’t expected to win necessarily- not with Deku, Todoroki, and Bakugo in the mix, but she had been excited to go down with the best of them.

Excited.

Her skin prickled as if trying to summon it up, some mimic of it, but

there was nothing there. Nothing but her skin, bone, and blood, a body that she didn't even belong in anymore.

"Uh...probably...probably not," she said, looking down at her hands. "I meant I don't..." She wiggled her fingers again. "My quirk is a little..." she choked back the disappointment (she was alive, after all, why should get so angry about the Sports Festival). "...wonky right now." She finished, looking up at them. They all looked so sad, uncomfortable, and unsure.

Hell, so was she.

They were just kids, after all.

No one knew what to do.

Least of all her.

She wanted to make it *not* uncomfortable for them (for her), and she wanted them to leave, and she was pissed at herself for thinking that about her friends (and Bakugo).

"...But it's okay," she said hurriedly, smiling, trying to fool them and herself. "I just have to retrain myself and figure out how the damage impacted my quirk."

Deku leaned in closer- looking at her hands- with his familiar, curious gaze. It almost set her at ease- that look wasn't hard to manage, and if he was nerding out about quirks, then he wasn't looking at her like she was inspiring him by merely existing.

She supposed it was better than looking at her the way her parents did.

"You can look," she said, holding out her hand for him. He gingerly brought the palm of his hand up, holding her hand aloft as he leaned in closer to look at her pads. For the first time, from the corner of her eye, she saw Bakugo move closer as well. That *would* be what got his attention, talk of power, quirks, and competition.

Deku's eyes moved over the angry red lines. She saw the storm of emotions in his eyes. He was a steady, sweet friend, but there was a side to him that their classmates saw- that she saw- that look in his eyes that were a half-beat away from going completely feral when he saw someone else in pain. While he wasn't quite there, she could see that part of him fighting its way to the surface, even as his touch

remained light and delicate beneath her hand.

"Your finger pads were damaged," he said slowly.

"How?"

The question is abrupt, almost comic. She looked up to see Todoroki peering over Deku's shoulder to get a view as well. Deku, bless his heart, winced, and looked back at Todoroki.

"What?" asked Todoroki, looking carefully at Deku and then back at Ochako, confused and a bit panicked. "I'm sorry," he said, slowly and carefully. "Please forgive me. I apparently do not know the proper way to talk to you, given your experience."

Ochako smiled- maybe her first authentic smile- it startled her so much she bit it back, almost on instinct, almost as if it scared her.

"Oh god, Shoto," she said. "No...no...no. Don't apologize. It's... I get what you were saying." She rubbed the pads together on her good hand, noting the difference of texture. It was hard to get used to. "There was a quirk suppression insert." She spoke slowly, casually, making sure to not stumble on something she didn't want to share. That would be the trick. To offer enough (always calm and collected so no one was afraid), but not so much that it overwhelmed her. None of the ugliest parts that would only make these people look at her the way her parents did. And the quirk insert was really no worse than what Deku regularly did to his own body.

"The night I escaped, I was able to cut it out." Kirishima winced at the end of the bed, and she could hear Tsu make a small noise. She silently begged her not to cry anymore. "I just didn't know where exactly it was."

"Good thing you didn't start on the other hand," observed Todoroki matter-of-factly.

"Duuude," scolded Kirishima.

But Ochako felt another familiar (though distant) laugh bubble up in her chest.

"What?" asked Todoroki, genuinely confused. "Objectively, it is..."

"He's right," inserted Ochako with a shrug. "I said the same thing, actually." Deku's shoulders seemed to relax at that while Todoroki

looked at Kirishima pointedly as if to say 'told-ya-so.' "Anyway," she continued. "After I did that and jacked up my finger pads, my quirk got a little weird."

"How?"

Other than his scold reminding her visitors of the time, this was the first time that Bakugo had actually spoken. He had moved even closer, standing a little to the left of Deku, looking almost curiously at her hands.

"Uh...I just uh cut my hands and dug around for a..."

"No dummy," he said. "How did it impact your quirk?"

"Oh," she shook her head. "Oh, right. I don't really know how to describe it, but it's kind of like the opposite of what I do now. Instead of making things float, I...it turns out I can make things fall? Increase the pull of gravity or something? I don't know if that's exactly how it works yet."

"Huh," said Deku thoughtfully, tapping his chin. "That's how you caused the sinkhole?"

She nodded.

"Yeah."

"Hmmm...I wonder if your finger pads were limiting the reach of your quirk in some way? Containing it or something?"

"Maybe," she said, keeping her voice light and semi-enthusiastic in a way she hoped sounded like her. The quirk specialist had come and spoken to her and the doctors, but she hadn't been listening. She had tried, but focusing for more than a few seconds had seemed impossible- her mind racing with everything and nothing all at once. "Either way," she continued. "It'll be a while before I get a handle on it."

"Still," said Deku with a happy bob of his head. "If your power is more than just zero-gravity and instead deals with the manipulation of mass that really opens up the application for your quirk."

"Yeah," she said, pulling her hand away from Deku and resting them in her lap. "Just not in time for the Sports Festival." Which means she would lose a chance to show the world what she could do. She was

already so far behind. "I was hoping for a rematch," she added on a whim, throwing a look at Bakugo.

"Tch...I don't need the Sports Festival to kick your ass, Pink Cheeks."

She swallowed the nickname down like sawdust, suppressing the shiver; the stupid reaction was buried in her body, recoiling against anything that wasn't her name.

*Sweetheart.*

*Baby.*

*Honey.*

All of them were slimy in her ear now; just a means to distance herself from her identity, to strip her of her self.

Except it wasn't. That wasn't how they meant it, not her mom, not her dad, and not from Bakugo.

She exhaled. She could do this.

"Give me a few months," she said. She had been teasing, but he was looking at her appraisingly as if weighing if she would need more or less time than that before he could fight her in good conscious. She broke her gaze away from him toward Tsu, who was staring at her, still trembling with emotion and unshed tears.

She didn't grudge her those tears- this was all too much. She just didn't know what to do with them. Well, that wasn't true. She knew what to do. It had once been so natural to her to reach out and make others feel better, to find the feeling behind the words (or screams) to mine the true meaning. But now her heart seemed to be short-circuiting, sparking and flying weakly inside of her, but when she tried to tell her mouth to move, her arms to reach- she went numb—the signal being caught somewhere in transit.

"We saw you getting all those people out..." It was Kirishima, who spoke of it tentatively first. They had seen the footage- which meant they saw her lose her mind on national television. She tried to side-step it, to ignore it. "It was super manly."

Ochako knew it would come up eventually. She had known that, of course. Ignoring it didn't do any good. She hoped it was like ripping off a band-aid. They were going to talk about it; friends at school



would talk about it; strangers at school would talk about it. And why wouldn't they? They always had processed and talked through work studies, internships, and near-death experiences.

But she wasn't ready.

She wasn't.

Her insides were screaming at her to run from this particular line of discussion. She ignored it and nodded.

"Thanks, Kiri," she said.

"Were you scared?" asked Mina.

No. Not at the end. Not really. The closest thing she felt was anger, cold-burning rage.

"Yes," she lied. It was the right answer, the human answer, the answer that proved she wasn't a shell of a person.

"We're all really proud of you," said Deku, sincere and devoid of anything like artifice. She believed him. He was proud of her, and that made her sick.

She couldn't look at him right now. She didn't want to let him down. She grasped at her soul as it attempted to detach from her body- to check out as she had learned to do over these past few weeks when the pain became too much when unwanted intimacy closed in on her.

"All right, extras." The gravelly command of Bakugo's voice broke through, bringing her back into the moment. "Let's clear the fuck out. We have class in 30 minutes, and we ain't missing the damn bus."

She could've sworn that he briefly looked at her from the corner of his eye, the only one to notice the small sigh of relief.

"I can stay, Uraraka," said Deku. "If you..." and he looked like he really wanted to. "If you want me too?"

Fuck.

Want?

No. She didn't want that. She loved him so much, and sitting under his wide-eyed stare of amazement was too much right now. But he asked. What was she supposed to say? Like she knew what the hell she

wanted.

“No way you fucking nerd,” barked Bakugo. “Advanced Combat in 30 minutes, and Aizawa will have our asses if we let the problem child wander all over town by himself. So, get the fuck up!”

“You shouldn’t miss class, Deku,” said Ochako, with an assuring squeeze of his hand. “And I’ll be back in a few weeks, pretty soon you’ll be seeing more of me than you can take.”

Deku nodded slowly and stood.

“Yeah, okay,” he said. Goodbyes were rushed, but that was okay. She was tired from the inside out, and tearful farewells would drain her of her very last drop of energy that she had left. Not to mention her sleep schedule was bare-bones at best as of late. The only way she could sleep for more than an hour was with the aid of the drugs they were still giving her- and that sleep was hardly restful. They told her that being inside for so long without the sun or the moon had thrown off her internal clock.

She supposed that was part of it.

But it was also the sounds, the smells, the tastes that were all waiting for her when she closed her eyes.

It wasn’t until Deku finally left that Ochako let her head fall into her hands, rubbing it to alleviate the straining pressure behind her eyes.

“Oi!”

She looked up suddenly, shocked to see Bakugo standing in the doorway, desperately awkward. He flipped open the flap of his messenger bag and pulled out a thin blue binder. He shuffled across the room, some odd mix of huffy and bashful that was somehow both surprising while also being entirely on-brand.

“Here...” he muttered, almost throwing the thing at her. She took it dumbly.

“What is it?”

“Fucking notes,” he said, his voice rising slightly. She looked at him for a moment before looking down at the binder.

“Fucking notes,” she repeated, confusion in her voice.

“Notes,” he barked. “Notes, assignments, all that shit!” He raked a hand through his spiky blonde hair, something almost like a pout on his lips. “Second-year is important, and I would rather our teachers didn’t have to slow everything down to hold your hand and walk you through everything. So...” he jerked his head toward the binder. “Study up, Pink Cheeks.”

Nope. The name was not growing on her, but still- she opened the binder and looked at the first page of photocopied notes- neat and thorough handwriting across the page.

“Wow,” she muttered. She didn’t know why; what was stirring in her chest as she looked at the pages, but something certainly was.

“Thanks, Bakugo.”

“Don’t thank me,” he mumbled before stepping away from her. “I certainly won’t be wasting my time on a rematch until you’re at your fucking best.”

She snorted and looked up at him. “Will do.”

He mumbled something then turned to leave.

“What was that,” she asked.

“Jesus, I said bye...are you deaf?”

“Actually,” she called to his retreating back. “I busted my eardrums because I overused my quirk, so yeah- a little deaf.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered. “Come talk to me when your quirk involves massive explosions two feet from your ears.”

She snorted again and shook her head. “Good-bye, Bakugo!”

He waved over his shoulder without another word as he slunk back into the hallway. She rolled her eyes and looked down at the binder again. She shouldn’t be surprised; Bakugo was undoubtedly one of the smartest students in her class, and his notes certainly showed that.

But more than that, they meant something else to her right now. Something she didn’t know she needed. Something she had been missing. All of her friends had been looking at her as if she had come back from the dead, awash with relief, and looking at her like she was some kind of miracle. Between that and the way her parents looked at her, the ghost of their shared trauma, the lens through which they saw

her, she hadn't once felt like herself.

She looked at the next page, at the dividers indicating the subject that the notes corresponded to along with subcategories that only someone as meticulous as Bakugo would come up with. And in the corner and margins of some of the pages, there were more notes, explaining greater context or simplified summaries that likely had been received in class.

It looked like maybe he had been taking notes for her for a couple of weeks, at least.

It had never occurred to him that she wouldn't be coming back. Like it never occurred to him to go easy on her at the Sports Festival.

She wasn't a miracle to him. She had just done what he expected her to do and assumed, of course, that she would need notes when she returned.

It was the only expectation so far that didn't make her feel completely crushed and broken.

She could do this.

She could be Ochako again.

She could.

She...

Her eyes fell on her hands again, at the jagged skin where that chip had been. She wouldn't be controlled like that again.

Never.

She would never be that Ochako again, the one that had been too weak to stop it. The one who had let her get controlled like that.

The problem was that she didn't quite know the alternative yet.

###

The ride back on the bus was silent at first, and Katsuki counted that a blessing- foolishly hoping that it would be like that the whole time. Icy-Hot, Deku, and Frog-Face were sitting at the back together, while Pinky's head was lying on Shitty Hair's shoulder, her arm looped through his, holding his hand tight.

They weren't usually so clingy; it was something that he appreciated about them if he were the type to appreciate or notice anything about his peers dating life. But Pinky had wanted to sit beside him, had, apparently, wanted to be close to the solid mass that was her boyfriend.

And Frog-Face was crying again on Deku's shoulder.

Katsuki turned and looked out his window, annoyed. She was always fuckin' crying any time anyone even brought Uraraka up. Hell, she had probably cried more times than Uraraka. He knew bringing Froggy along was a bad fucking idea, and he had told Shitty Hair as much. In fact, it was the only reason he ended up coming, instead of just sending his notes with Shitty Hair.

It wasn't that he hated her; as far as peers go, she wasn't the worst. She was mostly good at staying out of his way, and she knocked Mineta around when he needed it, so, overall, she wasn't the worst. But when he saw that Froggy would be tagging along, he knew exactly how this fucking visit was going to go. He just didn't understand how he fucking knew that, and no one else here did.

Were they idiots?

Of course, they were- but he didn't know they were *that* big of idiots. They were *her* friends after all, not him.

But he supposed maybe that was the problem. He figured people who cared too much better fucking be smart about it. The mix and match shit was exhausting as hell.

And the fucking pink-cheeked, hospital-bound, kidnap victim was collateral damage while her friends tried to figure this shit out.

Dumbasses.

"She looked so different..." breathed Deku, pain squeezing out of his words. Friggin Icy-Hot, to his credit, didn't offer any opinion- likely he was unsure of what kind of opinion he was allowed to have on the matter. The alien was obviously there for the nerd, likely feeling as awkward and out of place as Katsuki. There was something about how they were together that Katsuki- if he were given to opinions on anyone's relationship, which he was NOT- wondered about.

Though the two of them may not even be entirely aware of it- like he said- idiots!

"I know," agreed Mina, shaking her head. "I don't even want to think about what it was like..."

"Does...do we even know what happened exactly?" asked Kirishima.

Katsuki sunk lower into his seat, trying to block out the conversation.

"No," said Deku. "So far, everything has been kept very vague because the investigation is on-going. We know it was some kind of trafficking of quirked individuals, but that's..."

"So why don't you morons stop speculating on something you don't know shit about," Katsuki growled over his shoulder.

"Come on, dude," said Shitty Hair in a placating voice. "That's not what..."

"If she wants you idiots to know, she'll fucking tell you."

He propped his feet up on the empty seat in front of him and turned back around, so he wasn't looking at them anymore. Froggy looked like she was about to be sick, and Deku was looking at him with that curiously, probing gaze that made Katsuki want to punch his dumb face.

"I...I don't know if it'll be that simple, Kacchan," he said, voice sad and pitiful. "She was on the news, and even if she doesn't share, I doubt there's any way that she's going to be able to..." he was stuttering and falling over his words, a deep ache beneath them. It was the same empathy that the nerd felt for him, despite everything, and it was so goddamn galling. "Just...people are gonna find out."

He knew that, of course. Fuck, everyone knew when he was kidnapped for two fucking days.

And whatever the fuck was going on with all this was on a much bigger scale.

"Trafficking," muttered Mina, shuddering.

*Shut up,* he thought. He didn't want to hear them speculate anymore- it felt sleazy. He knew it wasn't. He knew they were worried, and that this group- if anyone- had earned the benefit of a doubt. But still, he remembered what it was like.

He remembered, both after the sludge attack and after his kidnapping,

how hard that was- how certain he felt that every eye was on him and every whispered conversation was about him (even when it wasn't). It had felt like shit.

"It doesn't necessarily mean that," said Deku. "It means so many different..."

"Exactly," Katsuki all but yelled, going onto his knees in his seat and spinning around to glare at his peers. "So stop fucking talking about it."

Deku fell silent, and Icy-hot fixed him with an intense, questioning gaze.

"The fuck are you looking at, Baked-Alaska?"

"Why are you even here?" he asked, his voice cold and clinical. "You aren't friends with Uraraka."

"None of your fucking business!"

"Kacchan, please," begged Deku.

"Fucking tell him," he growled, turning right in his seat. "He's the one up my ass."

He pressed his head against the window, done with this whole conversation.

If Pink Cheeks wanted her shitty, nosy friends to know what the hell happened to her, she'd tell them. And she very well might; she wasn't like him in that she didn't hate talking to people- or even people in general- as a rule.

But still...

They weren't wrong.

Katsuki may not be her friend, but he wasn't blind. The change in her appearance had been drastic as hell. He could have surmised that from the footage he saw of her, but it hadn't quite prepared him for seeing it in person.

Pink Cheeks wasn't even an accurate nickname anymore- she was missing the 'pink' and the 'cheeks' now. Her roundness- which he had only secretly and on the sly assessed to be respectable- was replaced by sharp angles and bones.

But her guts- also deemed respectable on the sly- were still very fucking intact. And at the end of the day, he gave fuck-all about almost anything *other* than that.

“I’m glad she’s planning on coming back,” said Mina, trying to keep her voice light. “That’s good but, if she has to wait for a long time, it’ll be hard to catch up.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” said Shitty hair with a sly smile. “Bakubro takes really good notes and...”

Katsuki spun around in his seat and slammed his fist into Shitty Hair’s shoulder before he could flinch away or quirk up.

“Shut your goddamn mouth, you fucker!”

Mina shifted away from the tussle as Shitty Hair rubbed his shoulder. “Dude, that hurt!”

“Good,” said Katsuki. “I meant for it too! If you keep yapping your trap, I’m going to punch you in the mouth next time.” He didn’t need anyone else up in his business, they were his fucking notes, and he could do whatever the hell he wanted with his notes. It wasn’t anyone’s business but his own.

And he supposed, Uraraka’s.

###

“One month...”

Ochako looked at her parents and then at Principal Nezu. She had never seen him so close before. Usually, she saw him through a crowd of students, and now he was sitting in her room. She had been surprised- it wasn’t like she was friggin’ Deku or Todoroki.

“Come home for one month,” her mother continued. “Rest and heal, and if you’re doing all right at the end of that, you can go to school.”

A month.

Another month lost.

A month of missed training.

Another month of falling behind her peers. She wouldn’t even be at her school for the Sports Festival- cool, cool, cool. A month of her



parents looking at her like she could disappear at any moment. But she knew that she owed them that- she owed them a month. She had been gone for so long; they had thought she might be dead for weeks. She supposed they were at least owed a month.

“And you’ll see a therapist once a week,” her mother continued with a tone that clearly communicated an expected objection and did not care one bit about it.

“Are you serious?!”

“Very,” her mother said. “In fact, it’s the only way we are even considering letting you go back.”

“I don’t need one,” she protested angrily. “I want to go back to normal, not dig up all the...” she bit back the curse on her dried lips. “I want to forget any of this happened and focus on the future; how am I supposed to do that if all I do is talk about it?”

“It is a requirement,” said Nezu, suddenly sticking his mouse nose into it. “Not only from your parents but also for us at UA.” She drew in a deep breath and expelled it slowly, trying to replace her frustration with something else. It wasn’t so much that she wanted to punch Nezu- she just wanted to punch someone all the time. Every minute of every day. It was exhausting. “If any pro went through something like this, they would also be required to see a therapist before returning to the field.”

“It’s school,” she snapped. “I’m not going to war- why do I need to see a therapist for Mic’s English class?”

It wasn’t an unreasonable request- she knew that in her heart, but the thought of doing it made her heartrate spike and made her stomach twist. She had no idea how to talk about it- how to talk about any of it. She wanted everything to go back to normal, but how was she supposed to do that when she was the nutjob who needed to leave class to go talk to a shrink?

Had they made Bakugo see a therapist?

Deku sure as fuck needed one, as many times as he had looked death in the eye.

How was she supposed to go to class, do homework, and look her teachers in the eye after she was done rehashing a nightmare she was trying to leave behind? How was she supposed to hold herself together

when she would be asked, specifically, once a week NOT to hold it together.

She had the slightest inkling that she wasn't sure if she would survive that.

But she could tell, from the look in her parents' eyes, that she would have too. They were in a place, she knew, where they would be inclined to give her anything she asked- anything to make her happy.

But this wasn't going to be worth it.

"Momma," she finally said. "Therapy is expensive and..."

"That's of no concern," said Nezu. "UA has contracted with a specific therapist. She regularly works with heroes."

It was her last card. So she slumped back into her pillow. "Fine," she said finally. "I'll see a therapist."

The words were bitter on her tongue and made her stomach lurch. It sounded like hell- but she didn't have much of a choice. And she would do whatever she had to do to get strong, to make it up to Li- to never, ever feel so helpless again.

###

Katsuki found himself in a bit of a pickle. He was not given to listening to gossip or drama- not at all. He had no interest in it, and he was physically irritated by people talking about Uraraka when she wasn't here.

But- he also wanted to know how the gravity girl was doing.

Fuck it- everyone did. He didn't have to make excuses. He wasn't a monster, and she deserved to be at UA. She had fucking earned it.

And he did care about that.

So he listened when he could- more attentive than usual, though not obvious, he hoped. Then, finally, a crumb of info he was too damn prideful to ask for was dropped by Pikachu of all people.

"Hey Mina," he asked when he sat down across from her at their lunch table. "Have you heard from Uraraka yet?"

"Oh yeah," she said. "We've texted a few times. She's home now. Been

there about a week.”

Good. That was good.

“She’ll be back in about three more weeks.”

“Three weeks,” exclaimed Pikachu.

“Yeah,” she said with a nod. “She wasn’t even sure she’d be able to come back at all.”

“Why?” he asked.

Dumb fuck. Though he supposed, like Deku had said, they didn’t really know what had happened. But he assumed anyone who saw that footage would know it had been fucked up- but maybe it wasn’t any more gnarly than Deku breaking his arms on national television.

They were a little desensitized as a whole.

“Because,” said Mina, almost defensively. “Her parents had no idea where their daughter was for a month and a half. If that happened to me, I’m not sure my parents would ever let me leave the house again after that.”

Pikachu looked appropriately scolded as he poked at his lunch.

“Bakugo got snatched too,” piped in Mineta.

*Just when did that little asshole get here?*

“Yeah,” he snapped. “For a fucking day, you shit-stain,” he growled, turning to kick the idiot under the table. “And Pony-Tail was smart enough to put a tracker on that behemoth so...yeah not the fucking same thing.”

There was still an investigation going on, but details and rumors were circulating already, whether they should or not. And he had no doubt that Uraraka knew that. It sounded so fucking exhausting- wondering what people knew about you or what people were saying or thinking.

And it was all everyone could talk about right now; the school was buzzing with the kidnapped girl from class 2-A. And while their class may be doing it with a lens of genuine concern and affection for the girl, the rest of the school was talking just to talk.

It was obnoxious as fuck.



# She Can (Do This?)

## Chapter Summary

Ochako goes home and then goes back to UA.

\*CW Restricted Eating/Vomiting

The vomiting is not forced and it's not graphic in description but because it's not just quirk related I wanted it to give a warning- but it is Ochako dealing with what being starved for that long did to her appetite and her relationship to food.

Ochako had made it a week, and she needed- *needed* - to get out. The feeling in her own house- the one she had grown up in felt like a prison. As soon as she stepped through the door, she could feel it in the air like a poison gas- the oppressive weight of their collective feelings.

They watched her- carefully. (What else could they do?)

They spoke quietly. (As if she would run if they were too loud.)

They always looked as though they were on the verge of tears. And when she wasn't around, when they thought she couldn't hear them, the crying from the kitchen and their bedroom was loud and heart-rending. There was more than one night she woke to her mother opening the door of her room, just to peek in, just to make sure she was there and alive and hadn't disappeared in the night. Ochako would keep her eyes closed, pretending to be asleep until they left.

She wanted to fix it. She wanted to offer them what they needed to make them forget for one second what they couldn't seem to stop thinking about when they looked at her.

She was already tired of the questions.

"How are you?"

*Fine .*

"How was your day?"

*Boring.*

“How do you feel?”

*Angry. Always angry.*

She felt like a bitch 90% of the time because, really, her parents were amazing. She knew that objectively- but every time they looked at her, she wanted to scream. Every time they spoke to her, in that calming, gently prodding voice, she wanted to snap.

It was why she needed to get out of here.

She loved them so much.

They loved her so much.

So she needed to get out before she hurt them.

And she couldn't understand why she felt this way about the people that loved her more than anyone- about the people who had wanted to see her alive again more than anyone. She couldn't understand why she couldn't just hug her parents like a normal kid- like Ochako would have done two months ago.

Why couldn't she feel anything other than a soul-tearing rage or complete emptiness? Were those her only options right now?

“Are you going to eat, Ochako?”

She looked up abruptly from her bowl of curry. Her mother had scooped a healthy portion into her bowl, but she had only managed to poke at.

She wanted to eat.

She really did.

She had been so hungry and cold there. She had thought so often about what she would eat when she got out of that place. She had thought, if anything, she could trust her body to go back to that very basic function of survival. But, so far, any time food was set in front of her, her stomach twisted in painful knots- she felt her blood pressure skyrocket, and her palms sweat. Every meal laid before her made her seize with panic and fear- fear that it may go away at any moment as her body twisted and lashed out in scarcity.

Almost as though she couldn't trust it.

So she either ate it all- too fast and too much until she was sick. She shoveled the curry into her mouth, and it turned into sawdust on her tongue. Or she ate none of it and just waited for the aching emptiness to go away without food.

She needed to get out of her house; to get back to school; she needed life to return to some semblance of normal. Maybe in her dorm, she wouldn't wake up choking on her own screams; Li's name caught desperately in her throat. She would wake now, biting her lip so hard she bled into her own mouth because she knew her parents would come running if they heard her.

When she did sleep, she woke in cold sweats, body tense, sore, and buzzing with energy that she couldn't get out. It was her routine for the past two weeks, and the only way she could breathe was when she left the house in the early morning, sleep or no sleep, to run herself into painful, numb oblivion on the dirt roads around their house. It was something familiar- if she couldn't be at school. It was a place she had gone to many times over the past few weeks. When it meant life or death. She would run until she reached that familiar place of exhaustion, and then she just kept going. She pushed herself until her head began to buzz. She went out into the woods by her house, where she would use and stretch and abuse her quirk until she threw up; until she was thoroughly soaked with sweat, mud, and dirt.

She attempted to recreate the power that she had used to escape, but it seemed just out of reach, but her quirk, that was more powerful now that she had learned to outright ignore the pain it wreaked on her body. It was something to feel, after all, when everything else felt frozen inside of her.

Her power was there- no doubt. But her control was not. In fact, if she had to guess, her control was more erratic than it had ever been. She uprooted trees at times, and other times she could barely lift a rock. She sent boulders hurtling to the ground with startling speed at times, and others she followed panicked, at her inability to release.

But...it was something to feel. The only time she felt anything other than her fury- the only time her body registered any sensations was when she ground herself into the dust, when it ached with hunger, and her head buzzed with exhaustion.

It was something to feel. And when it became too much to feel, she simply left it behind, detached herself from her body in that way that had become second nature- and then, she pushed for more, chasing

both the pain and the victory of conquering it.

She burned through Bakugo's notes- impressed with the thoroughness- mentally remarking on the irony of calling Deku a nerd when his notes were color-coordinated.

But she was grateful.

She was already behind.

Already too slow. Too weak.

So she needed to go to school. She needed to get out so she could put her body to use- begin moving it and working it again in a way that she couldn't do here. To get away from the look of profound sadness that her parents couldn't hide no matter how much they wanted to.

This was her routine for the first two weeks of her time at home. Until she settled into bed at 2 am, her laptop playing soft music through her broken speakers (because silence made something inside of her twist and scream and claw for purchase).

She clicked on it.

The unopened message had an attachment, sent at 6:34 pm. The document and the email were simply titled with the dates of the last two weeks.

Sender: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

She laughed, breathy and quiet, and clicked on the new material- hopefully enough to carry her for the next two weeks. Another stab of guilt struck her heart at the thought.

She loves them, she assured herself. She loves them so much.

She moved to click out of the email, ready to begin looking over the notes, but she paused, trying to remember through her haze of exhaustion, with a brain rolling around unmoored in her skull, what Ochako would have done two months ago.

Well, she'd be asleep, for one.

But she wouldn't just ignore an email. Old Ochako would have profusely thanked her peer- even if it was Bakugo. And she was trying to convince her parents, herself, that she still was that girl.



She reopened her email and typed out a quick response, hitting send without a second thought before returning to her notes, ready and hungry for something, anything to make her stronger and faster- anything to challenge and stretch and break her.

Something to make her feel.

And not feel.

Both and neither- her continual state, it seemed.

###

Bakugo glared at the email on his phone as he aggressively brushed his teeth and spit out the toothpaste.

To: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

From: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

Message:

*Oooh, homework!* ☐

😊 *Thanks so much! It's keeping me from losing my mind with boredom. Who knew you'd be such a good tutor!*

"Tch..." he rolled his eyes and washed his sink out. "I'm good at everything...that brat." He snatched up his phone and typed out a return message.

To: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

From: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

Message:

*Do your homework, brat. I'm not slowing down for your ass. Also, 2 am?! Really? Go to fucking bed.*

He shook his head and threw his phone down onto the bed as he jerked his black tank top over his head. 6:00 am meant he didn't have to fight any damned extras for time in the gym. He usually would've taken his phone with him but opted to leave it in his room- for some reason, he thought it might be a distraction this time.

###

Ochako rolled her eyes but was surprised by the smirk that tugged at her lips.

To: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

From: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*Message:*

*All right, dad. And don't worry, you won't have to slow down for me.*

The sun poured rays of yellow and pink through her window-disorienting her exhausted body, still not adjusted to anything even resembling a sleep schedule. But she didn't want to slow down. Not for a moment.

She would run and scrap and bleed until she caught; until there was nothing to run from.

###

Katsuki's eyes automatically went to the time stamp of her message-7:00 am, his eyes narrowed at the offending gap of time.

From: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

To: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*I'm gonna have to slow down to drag your ass out of bed because you'll be sleeping through the whole damn day.*

###

To: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

From: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*Woa. 9:30 pm- crazy night for you, Lord Explosion Murder. And wow, I'm truly honored you'd bother to come drag my ass out of bed at all.*

###

From: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

To: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*Don't be. It's only a true victory for me if I crush everyone. And you're telling me...it's half an hour past my bedtime.*

###

She surprised herself with the sound she made into her pillow, not a scoff and almost a laugh, a startled bark of a noise that made her look around the empty room on instinct to see if anyone else had heard it.

###

To: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

From: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*God forbid anyone keep Lord Explosion Murder from his beauty rest.*

###

Ochako didn't mind the distraction, but it did confuse her. She had spoken a few words here and there with Bakugo. She found him funny, and there were many things she had admired about him. But still, she was confused by this, by the visit to the hospital, and by the notes.

She was a little intrigued because if it were anyone else, she would assume they were talking to her because she was a pitiable, traumatized thing- or because, right now, she was novel, in the middle of something dramatic and exciting in its own gross way. But Bakugo was not one given to pity or distraction. So she hit send on her email, curious as to why he was indulging her.

###

Ochako was freezing, sick and hungry, cold, and afraid. Clothes soaked in sweat, blood trailing down her legs.

Wide eyes, frozen in shock and horror looked down at her- the golden-eyed boy, his pupils blown, blood seeping from under his slackening body. She heard his last garbled breath, felt the shudder of his body, the kick of desperation, and then....nothing.

It was the first time she had ever seen it- the movement from life to death, subtle but so obvious. There had been no peace, no moments of rest, just fear, suffering, pain, and then nothing.

The eyes changed, warped from golden to icy-blue, twisted in fear.

“Li!”

She could get to him this time.

“Li!”

The light faded in those blue eyes.

“Li! I’m here! I’ll save you!”

###

Routine at this point.

But it does nothing to quiet her thundering heart.

And this time, when she woke up, she knew something was off- the sensation in her body was familiar but not fitting her context.

Where was she?

She was awake, right?

She felt like she was...

Floating!

“Shit!”

She was wedged between the damn ceiling and her bed.

“Release!”

She fell onto her mattress just as her frame connected abruptly with the floor in a loud crash.

She hurried to pull the covers up and arranged herself into a sleeping position as she waited- waited to see if her parents had been stirred by the sound of her bed falling. She waited for the crack of the door, but it, thankfully, never came. When she was sure, she kicked off the

blankets and hurried to her wastebasket, unsure if the nausea was from her nightmare, use of quirk, or a combination OF both.

She hated the sensation. Her quirk had gotten her used to vomit- but that had been different somehow- full-bodied and quick, offering immediate relief. This was jerky and violent and acidic- stripping her of her energy and making her chest ache with the heaving.

She wiped her mouth with a dirty shirt on the floor and staggered to her feet. The sun wasn't up yet- so she quietly went to the bathroom where she cupped some water into her hand and splashed it on her face before grabbing the mouthwash.

She didn't bother looking at herself. Not again. It was too disorienting, and she avoided it as often as she could. It was an odd and unexpected reaction- she had never thought too much or too little about her looks, but her relationship to her body, to her physicality, had been integrated and solid, and to look in the mirror and not recognize herself was...difficult.

She trudged back to bed and opened her laptop to turn on a comfort show, only for her eyes to go immediately to the blinking mail icon, finding an email from earlier that evening.

---

From: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

To: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*I don't need any fucking beauty sleep. I'm peak beautiful.*

---

Her quiet chuckle made her sore chest ache, and her bones protest. She was too exhausted to respond right now- too weak and shaky, but all the same, the ghost of a laugh in the air scared away a small bit of the murky weight hanging over her bed, making it just a little less oppressive as her eyes slid shut.

She knew what was waiting on the other side of sleep, but she had to- her body was forcing her, and she didn't have any fight in her anymore.

###

“Good,” he thought when he woke the next morning without seeing a response from her. Maybe she actually had gotten some sleep that night.

###

To: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

From: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*Peak beautiful, huh? Will that be the name of your Ground Zero skincare line?*

###

“Ochako...I...”

Ochako looked up from her breakfast- toast, and milk. After two weeks, she had told her mother that all she could handle right now was food that was light and tasteless; it was the only thing that didn’t turn her inside into a churning mess.

“What is it, momma?” Ochako asked, noticing the way her sentence abruptly fell off and how her mother was looking at her.

“Uh...what, are you looking at?” she asked tentatively, stepping forward.

“Just school work, momma.”

“Oh,” she cocked her head slightly and looked at Ochako, for the first time in a way that Ochako could look at without feeling sad. “You just...I missed your smile.”

Had she been smiling? It made sense, she supposed. She knew how to smile, but her face felt so different now. It was hard to tell. But her mother was smiling- so Ochako smiled back at her- pulling one out like some bit of retained muscle memory.

“School makes me happy, momma.”

She saw the moment of conflict in her mother’s eyes, hearing the dual message of her words and the desperate please, the bid that she was

doing better- that in a week and a half, Ochako would be ready to return to UA.

So Ochako smiled again and bit into her toast, accommodating and small.

###

From: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

To: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*I think the-fuck-not. The idea of merch at all skeeves me the hell out.*

---

To: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

From: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*Are you kidding? The thought of a little boy running around with his Ground Zero plushy and wanting to be a hero just like you doesn't make your cold, cold heart warm?*

---

From: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

To: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*Not one bit. Also, little girls will also have Ground Zero action figures; the future number one hero is for all genders.*

---

To: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

From: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*I cut the hair and painted the nails on my dolls, so get ready...*

---

From: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

To: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*Action figure! Not doll.*

---

To: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

From: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*Right, action figure! Adorable*

---

From: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

To: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*You're rude as fuck to someone sending you notes and homework. I could cut you off, and then you'll have to wade through Deku's mountain of shit.*

---

To: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

From: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*I apologize, and to make it up to you, I will send you a Uravity plushy.*

---



From: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

To: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*Make it a Uravity hoody, and I accept the terms.*

---

To: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

From: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*Ha. Got it. Pink is your color.*

---

From: [Ground0@ua.edu](mailto:Ground0@ua.edu)

To: [mochilover@ua.edu](mailto:mochilover@ua.edu)

*All colors are my colors- ain't a single one I don't look good in.*

---

They emailed back and forth over the week, and Ochako was no closer to divulging why he was talking to her. He certainly wasn't emailing her because he *wanted* to talk to her; he didn't need anything from her; this wasn't mutually beneficial for him, but he kept responding all the same.

She did find it funny that he was emailing her instead of texting, and then it struck her that he stayed out of all the group chats and likely didn't have her number. Just like she didn't have his. That was how little they considered each other friends.

And yet she found herself looking forward to his emails, reaching the closest she ever did to laughing when she read them. But then, she

supposed she had always found him funny- even when he wasn't trying.

She received texts from Deku, Tsu, and Mina, but that was normal and expected, unlike her correspondence with her explosive acquaintance. But at the end of the day, her mind was too occupied to handle it- too crowded with exhaustion, an exhaustion that mixed confusedly with hyperawareness, her body being torn between sensitivity to every sound and sensation (almost painfully) and numbness that allowed her to push herself toward breaking.

Exhausting and exhilarating.

So she didn't have time to think of it. She supposed it didn't matter- it was something she relatively enjoyed during this weird limbo before she could move forward, something to help her pass the day without completely losing her mind.

Getting over all of this.

Getting back to...

Well, she had no idea what. Her future once so real and focused now blurred into a vapor that she couldn't quite get a grasp on. But that didn't matter; she would run until she had it again.

###

She would be back soon, and while he never would admit that to anyone, least of all to himself, the thought made him...

Anxious? Nah.

Nervous? Maybe.

Why? He had no fucking idea.

For her?

About her?

About all those morons who...

"What the fuck, dude!? I'm tapping!!"

Katsuki looked down at Shitty Hair pinned by his knee to the mat, Katsuki's forearm pressed hard into the moron's neck. Katsuki

immediately let go.

“Oh, you’re fine, Shitty Hair,” he said, rolling off of him toward the edge of the mat.

“Why are you so spaced out?” asked Shitty Hair, sitting up and rubbing at the spot on his neck that Katsuki had been choking.

“Because,” said Katsuki. “You’re boring as fuck to fight.”

“Wwwoa,” said Kirishima, holding up his hands. “Not a proportionate response, my dude.”

“Boohoo...” Kirishima rolled over to the edge of the mat and grasped the nearest water bottle. “Hey!” snapped Katsuki. “Don’t drink from my water. I don’t want your nasty ass germs!” He jerked it from Kirishima’s grabby hands.

“I’m clean,” he yelped, dodging Katsuki’s fist. “I swear.”

“Worst sparring partner ever,” grumbled Katsuki, taking a drink.

“Not my fault no one else will have you,” said Shitty hair. “Beggars can’t be choosers.”

Katsuki bemoaned again his sorry state that Shitty Hair had somehow become his best friend.

“Mina said that Uraraka should be coming back next week,” said Kirishima, suddenly out of the blue, looking at the mat.

“Tch...why do you think I care?”

“Didn’t say you did,” said Kirishima with a shrug. “Mina has been texting her, though, and...”

“Didn’t I *just* say that I don’t care?” Katsuki interrupted.

It wasn’t a lie- but it certainly wasn’t the truth either. He just... anytime her name came up, he felt anxious- like she could walk in at any moment and know that she had been the topic of conversation.

Even if no one was saying anything bad.

“I know,” said Kirishima. “I just was giving the benefit of a doubt that you aren’t a complete asshole.”

“Big mistake.”

Shitty Hair looked up at the ceiling and brushed the sweat from his brow. “Damn,” he said with a sigh. “Coming back to school is going to be so hard for her.”

“Yeah,” said Katsuki, slapping the bottom of Kirishima’s shoe and standing up. “Because you losers won’t shut up. Now come on, we are going again.”

“You bruised my trachea, Bakubro!”

“You don’t need your trachea to spar! Now get off your ass!”

“Ugh, fine,” whined the red-head, standing up laboriously. “I guess I’m ready to see my life flash before my eyes.”

“Drama king...” he muttered, sinking into a fighting stance. “Come on!”

###

Ochako looked around the room- most of her stuff was still in her dorm, but there were a few books, older clothes, clothes that no longer fit her, the rest of her antibiotics, and her sleep medication, but not much else.

She didn’t need much.

But that had always been true.

A knock on her door drew her eyes from where she sat on the floor, surrounded by the things she would take back with her.

“Come in,” she called.

Her mother opened the door, slowly, red-eyed and anxious, and Ochako felt sick with guilt. They asked her several times if she was sure; if maybe she had changed her mind and wanted to wait.

She told them, each time, firmly, that yes, she was sure and that she wanted (needed) to go back. She was making them hurt- she knew that, but she was making them hurt by being here too. She smiled up at her mother; it was the very least she could do.

“Are you...almost packed?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Ready to go bright-eyed and bushy-tailed tomorrow!”

Her mother nodded. “Is...is there anything you want to do today?” Her voice had an unspoken question, a plea. “Anything at all? We could go into town and get lunch at the café you like.”

Ochako breathed in and looked back down at her stuff, her gaze passing briefly over the body length mirror resting against her wall. The length of red from her forehead to her jaw was healing nicely and would likely just be a thin, barely-visible scar soon.

Her hair was longer than it had ever been, dull and fragile in a way it never had been- long enough to put into those ridiculous pigtails, long enough for strangers to pull and fist and...

Her eyes snapped up to her mother, and she smiled.

“Yeah,” she said with a nod. “I’d like that! Do you...” her mother stepped closer, tentative, but eager to hear Ochako’s request, eager to be a mother. “Could we also stop somewhere in town so I can get a haircut?”

“Of course.” Ochako could see her mother’s arms pressed firm to her side, resolute, and resigned. Ochako reached out to her, meeting her half-way. Ochako knew her mother was doing her best, her very best in this impossible situation, one that no one knew how to navigate.

They all were doing their damn best.

Her mother shuddered in her arms and tried to muffle her tears, and Ochako felt a spark of something in her chest- something unnamable- something so wicked and frustrating that she moved to stomp it out.

Her mother loved her.

So damn much.

And Ochako loved her too.

But her silent tears on Ochako’s neck, tears that Ochako would have held space for a few months ago, now just grated on her nerves. Some part of her, some wicked and ungrateful part of her, wanted to shake her mother and tell her to stop crying, that it did no good, not for her and not for Ochako.

Was Ochako a monster now? Inhuman? Incapable of affection?

No.

She loved her mother- that she knew.

That was still one real thing.

###

Ochako sat on her couch, bathed in the dim light of the T.V, sitting between her sleeping parents. All day they had just wanted to be with her- taking her in during their last day of knowing exactly where she would be. She didn't want to think about what it would be like for them when she was gone. She knew the conditions of her leaving required a check-in once a day via text and a phone call three times a week. But still, they were desperate and so very worried.

So she stayed on the couch with them that night; they were exhausted, so they fell asleep a few minutes into the movie they had started, while Ochako's mind raced with fervent excitement.

This would all be behind her soon.

She just needed space, and whether her parents knew it or not, they needed space too. Some distance would allow the pain to dull just a bit, and maybe, next time they were together, they could smile and laugh again like they used to.

When she saw them again, she would be stronger.

She would learn to control these new facets of her quirk- right now so sporadic and unpredictable. She'd get control over it- over all of it. Over everything.

Her phone dinged, drawing her attention to the text.

**Text Message from Deku**

*What time will you get in tomorrow? Everyone is so excited to see you. What do you want for dinner or snacks? Anything you want!*

She does love him, and she could practically hear his excitement jumping out at her through the text, the burning, uniquely Deku desire to make her- make everyone- smile. She typed out a quick

response.

### **Text Message to Deku:**

*Probably about 3:30! But we have to meet with Nezu and a few teachers first, so I probably won't be back to the dorms until 4 or so. But whatever everyone wants! I don't want to put anyone out! You know I'll eat anything.*

She felt another strange sensation of dysphoria as she read the text- it was muscle memory. How she texted, but it felt like an echo, a pale imitation of a girl who was as far away from her as she possibly could be.

Would he notice?

Her phone binged again.

### **Text Message from Deku:**

*Sounds great! Text when you leave and when you get here?!*

### **Text Message to Deku:**

*Will do!*

She set her phone down only for it to ding again, and she was surprised to see Kirishima's number on the screen.

### **Text Message from Kirishima:**

*Uraraka! My crazy girlfriend really wants to throw you a welcome home party, and while she is set on this being a surprise, I wanted to check and make sure that was cool.*

Ochako read the text, surprised at the thoughtfulness. Kirishima was undoubtedly kind and pleasant, but she was astonished that he would think to wonder if it was something she would want instead of assuming that it was (a safe assumption as far as her friends were aware).

She didn't want one, but that wasn't the point.

She also didn't not want one.

If places were switched, and one of her classmates was coming back after something like this, she would want to acknowledge it too- so

she understood the impulse. It would feel strange not to recognize her homecoming, even if what she *really* wanted was to sneak in the back, get a good night's sleep in her dorm room, and just wake up and go to class. She wanted to pick up right where she left off.

But maybe this was like ripping the band-aid off. She could weather this party- and it would be the last of it, she would be their classmate again, people would see her laughing and eating cake and looking normal, and maybe that would finally be the thing that would make her feel like she was ready to move on.

Maybe this would help people move on quicker.

**Text Message to Kirishima:**

*I trust Mina! Whatever she wants will be fine.*

**Text from to Kirishima:**

*Excited to see you, my dude! 👍*

*###*

“There! Happy?!”

Katsuki snorted at the phone screen Kirishima held out in front of him.

“Get that fucking thing out of my face,” he barked, knocking Shitty Hair’s hand away and turning his face back down to his book. “Besides,” he grumbled. “Whatever Pinky wants isn’t a fucking answer.”

Kirishima’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully on Katsuki.

“You’re being so weird,” said Kirishima. “You’re the one who told me to check, and now that I have...”

“I’m not being weird,” Katsuki objected, with perhaps a little too much force, drawing the attention of the few others who had gathered in the common area. Katsuki was not eager to have this particular conversation with- well, anyone- but certainly not his class. “You all are being weird; why are you suddenly all buddy-buddy with...”

Kirishima scoffed. “This again,” he sighed. “*You* weren’t her friend, dude.” Katsuki balked at the very true comment. Not even an accusation, just an observation that couldn’t be contested. “Sure, I



wasn't her best friend, but I like her. She's a cool girl, and I was worried about her, and now I'm glad she's back."

Katsuki's nostrils flared- frustrated with the sense of it and how easy it was for Kirishima to say things like that, to just fucking admit how he felt. Kirishima sighed and sunk back into his chair.

"Look, man," he said. "If you have any advice about how we should respond to something like this, then..."

"Course I don't," he growled.

"Well," said Kirishima. "Should we ignore it?"

Maybe? Probably not.

"No..."

"Then what?"

"Fuck," he explained, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Shitty Hair, I don't know, and I don't care but don't fucking..." he stood up from the table he had been eating at, flustered and annoyed. "I just don't want everyone to trial and error this shit at her expense- she's been through hell as it is."

Kirishima leveled him with another knowing look. Katsuki gathered his stuff- it was late, and he needed to sleep and to get away from this conversation.

"Yeah," said Kirishima, weariness in his voice. "You're right. But we... we don't know what to do either."

Katsuki saw the look in Kirishima's eyes- unusually weighted in emotion, genuinely conflicted. Katsuki felt the tiniest, minuscule tug of sympathy. Kirishima had a wily, mischievous grin 90% of the time, and now his mouth formed a tight line.

Maybe Shitty hair was her friend, after all.

Maybe, Katsuki was the only asshole in the whole class who wasn't her friend. Well, him and Mineta, though the thought made him bristle. He didn't like to think of himself as being in the same category as that little shit in any way, shape, or form.

"Whatever, man," he sighed. "It's fine. I'm sure Pink Cheeks will love whatever cheesy reunion ya'll give her."

Kirishima's gaze snapped to Katsuki, quizzically.

"Do you really?" he pressed, clearly not confident.

But then, neither was Katsuki.

###

Ochako blinked dumbly down at her phone. She didn't recognize it, but it was fairly easy to know who it was.

**Message from Unknown Number:**

*What the hell kinda welcome do you want tomorrow, Cheeks?*

She saved the number quickly before responding.

**Message to Bakugo:**

*Why are you on the party planning committee?*

**Message from Bakugo:**

*No, but people are acting stupid and worried about it- so just tell 'em what you want and be done with it.*

**Message to Bakugo:**

*People don't need to worry.*

**Message from Bakugo:**

*That ship has sailed. So tell Mina or fucking Deku what you want.*

It didn't surprise her that it existed so simply in Bakugo's world. He always seemed to know what he wanted. But even before this, what she wanted always depended so much on what others needed or wanted from her.

And now... she had no clue what she wanted.

**Message to Bakugo:**

*I don't know.*

It was maybe the most honest she had been in weeks.

**Message from Bakugo:**

*Yeah.*

There was no judgment or pity- just a simple affirmation, not meant to berate or to coax, or supply any answers. She wondered if for Bakugo it was sort of its own tentative invitation.

**Message to Bakugo:**

*I'm not sure what I want, so whatever makes them happy to do, I don't care.*

She waited, thinking that would be the end of it. Maybe. He was probably bored as hell with this conversation.

**Message from Bakugo:**

*They all care about what you want, you just gotta tell them.*

She laughed at the small “they”- distancing himself- making it clear that he didn’t care. Something she would be more inclined to believe if he hadn’t taken several unexpected roles onto himself, from tutor to student body liaison- for some strange, unknown reason.

And she knew he was right- she had a good class. The students of 2-A loved her, but it felt vaguely like they were nudging a hunk of barely beating heart with a stick. She couldn’t offer back the enthusiasm their love and affection earned (expected), and it filled her with guilt.

**Message to Bakugo:**

*Guess I just need to grow a backbone and tell them.*

**Message from Bakugo:**

*You got plenty of backbone, Pink Cheeks. Just need to not be so fucking polite all the time. Now go to fucking bed before 3 am tonight, huh?*

**Message to Bakugo:**

*Okay, grandpa. See you tomorrow.*

**Message from Bakugo:**

*The fuck you talking about? I'm not going to that damn party.*

Ochako laughed. She had no idea if Bakugo was her friend at this point- no fucking clue as to why he was talking to her in the first

place. But still, she called his bluff.

**Message to Bakugo:**

*I think you are.*

**Message from Bakugo:**

*What-fucking-ever.*

**Message to Bakugo:**

*You're the one who told me not to be polite and say what I want.*

She sent it without truly considering how it sounded- how it may sound to someone like Bakugo, who didn't know her. Her mind began to race with worry, and she considered a quick joke to follow up.

She wasn't even sure she wanted to be at the party, why the hell would he?

But before she could think of one and before her insecurity could snowball, her phone dinged again.

**Message from Bakugo:**

*Fine, I'll be at your damn party.*

She smirked wordlessly.

**Message to Bakugo:**

*Good.*

**Message from Bakugo:**

*Whatever. I'm going to bed now.*

**Message to Bakugo:**

*Sounds good. Thanks, Bakugo.*

She clicked her phone off and sat it back down in her lap- looking at her mom as she snuffled and stretched. She sighed and laid her head tentatively on her father's shoulder and then moved it away abruptly.

It was too much.

All of it was too much. She needed a change- a shift- she needed to focus, to get through this party, her first week of inevitable awkwardness and reintegration. But then it would be okay.

She looked down at the healing skin on her fingers and the puckering scars.

It had to be.

###

Katsuki wasn't sure why he was going, but that seemed to be his general vibe for the past few months. He was doing a ton of shit he didn't have a reason to do. Well, maybe he wasn't entirely unsure of why. He may be an asshole, but he cared that things were fair, and it sure wasn't her fault that she had missed almost three months of school. He thought hard work and grit and giving your whole fucking all into something should count for something. And it was no skin off his nose to send her notes.

But the rest.

The emailing, the texting, and staying on Kirishima's tail to make sure that they weren't doing anything stupid- none of that he could rightly sort out in his head. None that made sense enough to settle his anxiety.

He heard shouting outside his door and the footfalls of people running down the halls outside, prompting him to move from his bed to the window, peering outside to the street below. He saw Uraraka, flanked on either side by her parents. She looked no more like herself than she had in the hospital.

He had assumed from some of the times that he received emails from her that she wasn't getting a lot of sleep, but it didn't look like she was eating particularly well either. She had looked malnourished when he saw her in the hospital, but he had assumed that she would have been eating better in the past month being home.

He leaned closer into the window, peering down at her. Her hair looked- different? He was certain it used to be rounder, but now it was probably shorter than his. He didn't consider if it was good or bad- it was just hair, hair was neutral (except for Kirishima's), but it was different.

It was a safe bet that the people beside her were her parents. The

woman specifically looked like a replica of Uraraka- or he supposed Uraraka was a replica of her, except while Uraraka remained somewhat stoic, her mother was a sobbing mess as she pulled her daughter into a hug just outside the dorms. He watched- probably longer than he should- but couldn't really bring himself to look away. It was fascinating; his mother had cried too when he was recovered, but it was closely followed by a smack to the back of his head for getting kidnapped in the first place.

Katsuki, as a rule, didn't like tears- he found them useless, especially when he was the one shedding them. But he didn't grudge Uraraka's mother her tears. She had earned them if anyone had. But then her dad, the hulking lumberjack of a man at her side, all but collapsed around them, giant arms trying to hold his wife and daughter at the same time, that...that was like a sucker punch to the gut even for someone like Katsuki to see, the discomfort enough to make him look away.

But before he did, he spared one last look at Uraraka, pressed between them both, eyes shut tight, face screwed up as if she was just waiting for them to let her go.

And as they cried into her hair, it was noticeable to Katsuki that Uraraka's eyes were dry.

###

Ochako watched as her parents walked away, and it destroyed her to see how hard it was for them. She sighed shakily and readjusted the strap on her shoulder.

She was almost done with this.

She could do this.

She ran a hand through her hair, still adjusting to the tousled pixie cut. She had told the hairdresser to pick whatever she thought would look best on her, but she honestly didn't care. As long as the tapered pieces didn't brush against her cheeks, as long as it was off her neck, as long as it didn't rest on her shoulders.

That was all that she cared about.

She turned and faced the dorms. Soon this would all be over. She could do this. Her routine would set in, and she would become old news. She tried to smile, that slow, awkward thing her mouth

instinctively went to now when she was trying to look like there was something inside of her besides emptiness and the feeling of being burned alive by something she couldn't control.

She walked up to the door and could hear Mina shooshing on the other side. She lingered for a moment, her hand on the door, taking a silent moment to enjoy the sound of the tittering on the other side.

“Perhaps jumping out at her in the dark isn’t the wisest choice,” she heard Shoto whisper.

“Bakubro,” Kirishima’s voice said insistently. “Hide!”

“No fucking way I’m squatting in the dark like you morons.”

“Mineta, get the hell off of my leg, you piece of shit!”

“Jiro language,” scolded Iida and then, “but she’s absolutely right, Mineta. Keep your hands to yourself.”

Ochako cracked the door slightly- allowing them the chance to quiet, not wanting to ruin the surprise. When she stepped inside, the light flipped on, and shouts of excitement filled the common room, noisemakers blew out, and a chorus of indefinable welcomes and cheers and greetings filled the air (along with what she’s sure was an accidental *happy birthday* from someone who had not understood the assignment).

She hoped she looked surprised and not afraid- she knew there was no reason to feel anything but grateful and loved- and she did. But, all the same, her heart was pounding in her chest, her skin was prickling, and her body was tensed and ready to run as if a predator was lurking somewhere that she couldn’t see.

As if her stupid brain and body didn’t know what safety felt like anymore.

“Oh my god, guys,” she said, raising the pitch of her voice to something she hoped was excited not so brittle as it sounded in her ear. It had started to sound more like her over the past month, but there was still something that rattled in her ear as off every time she spoke. She clasped her hands together and did a little hop. “Thank you all so much! This is amazing!”

She didn't have time to say anything else before Toru rushed toward her, throwing her arms around her in a hug, and then Momo and then

so many others.

So many.

She clenched her jaw.

She could do this.

She was safe...

She was okay.

"Is it too much?" asked Mina.

"No, it's perfect," she answered, looking over Momo's ponytail as the girl hugged her.

"Can I take your bag for you, Uraraka?" asked Tokoyami, the quiet boy suddenly at her side, standing a tentative distance from her (less prone than his classmates to any type of physical affection), holding out his hand.

"Uh sure," she said, sliding it off of her shoulder. "Thank you, Tokoyami." He nodded and shuffled away with her bag. She had no idea why or even where he was taking it, but she didn't want to ask him. He seemed uncomfortable enough even making the kind gesture.

"Uraraka, we're so glad you're back!"

*Thanks. Me too.*

"We missed you!"

*I missed you all too.*

"Dude, we saw you on T.V. You were so badass."

*Thanks .*

"We are jubilant at your return!"

*Jubilant...wow.*

She nodded and accepted hugs as best she could; the only indication that they felt that something was different, that she wasn't completely unchanged, was the way they hugged her; light, almost uncomfortable, like they were afraid she'd break in their arms.



Which made sense; she knew how she looked. She had spent two hours looking at herself in the salon chair, and she still wasn't adjusted.

"You cut your hair."

The voice making that observation was, surprisingly, Todoroki's. He was paused in front of her, his head cocked to the side.

"Yeah," she said with a nod.

"It's as short as mine," he continued.

She laughed and ran a hand through it.

"Shorter, probably."

He looked at her like he was peering into her soul.

"Is it a trauma response of some kind to seek a change or..."

"He means it looks great," shouted Deku, hurrying up to her side. Ochako laughed again, a little louder- she wasn't sure if it sounded sincere, she was hoping that she was getting better at laughing.

"No, he didn't," she said good-naturedly.

"I didn't mean that it looks bad either," muttered Todoroki. She noted again how they stood close to one another.

"Ahh, thanks, Shoto," she said. "Such a charmer."

She could do this.

She could. She could tease her peers; she could be at ease with her friends. She stepped closer- seizing on any courage in her- and threaded her arm through Deku's

"I heard there were snacks for me," she said, and Deku's eyes lit up. Ochako could lie and fake it all night if he kept smiling at her like that. He walked with her as though the chance to escort her to the snack table was the highlight of his second year.

"Okay, Deku," she said, looking over her shoulder at Shoto and then leaning in close to Deku. "What's going on?"

He leaned into her, confused as a new-born lamb. "What!?"

“You and Shoto,” she said, looking side-to-side, assuring that they were removed enough from the pockets of students gathering together in the room. “I’ve spoken maybe three times to him, and suddenly the guy is visiting me in the hospital, showing up at my surprise party, and talking about my hair.”

Deku looked at the dessert table, his cheeks suddenly flushed. “He’s uh...just...being nice,” he squeaked. Ochako’s eyes narrowed playfully.

“Uh-huh,” she said. “Nice...sure.”

“Ochako, this is your party,” he said. “Why are we talking about me?”

“Because it’s my party,” she said with a smirk. “And it’s what I want to talk about!”

She could do this. She could get here again. She could have this again. She could be a normal high school girl, talking about crushes and homework and silly things with her best friend. She could be the girl who loved cake.

She could.

She didn’t need therapy. She could be normal again.

Deku looked around the room awkwardly, but a delighted smile tugged at his lips as if he had been waiting for her to ask.

“Nothing to know yet,” he said, but, all the same, the smile was there. “It was...it was really hard when you...” he looked at her worriedly, and she hoped her face stayed interested. “I just really missed you. And Shoto was very supportive during that time, and I think...we just...we got closer.”

Ochako sighed dramatically. “Okay,” she said. “But if you ever find yourself agonizing over the subtext of a text, let me know!”

“You’ll be the first,” he said with an eager nod. “Now...” he turned toward the table. “Sato went a little crazy and just made you one of everything he knew how to make.”

Ochako looked down the long table, crowded with cookies, cakes, pies, cupcakes, truffles, and souffles. “Yeah,” she said. “No, kidding!”

Her stomach clenched at the sight of it. She had almost exclusively

been subsisting on toast, crackers, carrots, and broths over the past month- light, bland foods were the only thing her stomach could handle

“What piece do you want, Ochako?! We have raspberry, chocolate chiffon, lemon méringue, strawberry angel cake.”

“I have chips.”

Ochako almost leaped out of her skin when Shoto fell in beside them, a plate of chips in his hand. He held them out toward her, clunky and awkward, and humorously close to her face. “Would you like a chip, or are the two of you still speaking in confidence?”

Ochako shook her head and accepted the plate of cake from Deku.

“Nope,” she said. “All done!” She looked around the room. “Where’s Sato? I want to thank him for all of the desserts.”

Shoto looked at her for a moment, and she prepared herself for another comment so blunt that it either made her laugh or feel deeply exposed, but instead, he just pointed toward the wall where Sato, Koda, and Shoji were standing.

“Thanks, Shoto!”

She threw a wink at Deku before she headed toward the new group. She could start making her rounds. She could rest and recover from this tonight and start fresh tomorrow. As she walked, she took several bites of cake, choking them down hurriedly.

“Oh, sweet, Uraraka!” She froze, anger bubbling in her chest at the voice. Fuck, that had been unaccounted for. She had her simmering fury in check right now, but that voice was like a match in a powder keg. “Uraraka, how I missed you and your beautiful...”

She whipped around as Mineta rushed toward her at a hop and a skip, arms eagerly outstretched toward her. But he didn't make it a step closer before he was suddenly wrapped up in a long strand of tape and jerked back violently. Ochako followed the line across the room to Sero, who was leaned casually against the wall with Kaminari, Kirishima, and Bakugo. Sero nodded at her with a warm smile, as if nothing had happened, while Mineta remained trapped in his tape. Kirishima looked like he was trying to calm down a glowering Bakugo. The blonde's palms were out and crackling, his murderous gaze fixed on the now restrained Mineta.

Ochako smiled gratefully at Sero and loosened her clenched fists a bit before she turned away and continued her trek uninterrupted toward her original destination.

“Sato,” she said, her voice light and open, she hoped. The three boys looked slightly awkward at her, but she smiled through it. She knew things would be uncomfortable for a while, but the more she smiled, the more she laughed, the more she looked like herself, the sooner the awkwardness would leave, the sooner she could convince them that there was nothing to worry about. That nothing was wrong. “The cake is so good!”

Sato’s face broke out into a huge grin.

“Oh, thank you so much, Uraraka,” he said happily, glowing from the compliment. “I couldn’t decide what to make, and I know you like anything sweet.”

She felt another wave of affection for class. They were all brave and powerful, but they were also exceptionally kind and compassionate. Sato, like a few others in this room, was not a close friend, and yet he had done this incredibly kind thing for her.

“You’re right,” she said, taking another bite of the cake. “I do!”

She could eat this piece of cake. It was the least she could do.

“We’re very glad you’re back,” said Koda, voice bashful, and Shoji nodded in affirmation, ever the silent type.

They chatted a bit longer while she finished her piece of cake; the thick frosting was heavy on her tongue, the cake, sweet and thick, was hard to force down her throat, but she swallowed as she asked about classes, checked in with her friends, and made her rounds through the room.

She tried to keep her mind present through all the conversations, all the questions. She ignored the palpitating in her chest, and she fought the desire to turn at every footstep, to drop into a defensive posture at every loud peel of laughter. By the time the cake was gone, the noise and the bodies and the churning in her stomach was making it hard to breathe.

She felt like all the moisture was being siphoned out of her body, and the floor was shifting ever so slightly under her feet.

She politely excused herself from the group and walked toward the bathroom, only to rush past it toward the side door exit. She flung it open, hurriedly, and stumbled down the three steps and her knees hit the grass, vomiting up the cake she had just eaten.

“Shit,” she gasped, clutching at her stomach. She sat there for a moment, breathing deeply, spitting out the remaining taste and saliva. She reached up and used her sleeve to wipe at her mouth and then staggered back to her feet. She didn’t straighten right away but moved to brush the dirt off her jeans and then stood there for a moment, bent at the waist, taking in long breathes of fresh air, trying to cool the heat in her cheeks. She wobbled over to the stairs and flopped down on the bottom step, holding her knees to her chest. She tried to will away the burning nausea and the panic that was still hot on the back of her neck, the fight or flight she couldn’t find an off switch for.

She sat there for a good 15 minutes, trying to coax her heightened nerves out of the tree, but they wouldn’t budge. When the door cracked open behind her, she jumped to her feet, ready to make her apologies, to explain her current absence and her currently mussed state, but the explanation died in her mouth when she saw Bakugo. For some reason, she didn’t feel like she had to explain to him.

“You know,” he said, leaning up against the railing of the stairs. “You made me come to your damn party, but you’re allowed to ditch it?”

She felt the spark of anger rear its head- a little different than the one she had felt when Mineta had approached her, this one felt...a little liberating.

“No one makes you do anything,” she shot back. “And I’m not ditching. I just needed a little bit of air.”

“Yeah,” said Bakugo. “All that fake ass smiling would wear me out too.”

She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at him. “It’s not all fake,” she growled- surprising herself with her tone. She had been doing such a good job over the past month, boxing up all her unpleasant emotions so that she didn’t spill them all over the people around her, people who didn’t deserve to be on the receiving end of the toxic bile inside of her. She had hoped that the negative space of numbness may eventually fill up with something more familiar, something more like her, but the only thing that slid into its place was something unpleasant and ugly- something she was terrified to indulge.

But she had turned so quickly at Bakugo's tone. She really shouldn't, considering how he had been so much nicer than he was obligated to be.

"Whatever you say, Cheeks," he said with a smirk. "But, everyone's gonna panic if you don't say goodbye before going to your room."

She stared him down for a moment. His eyes flickered down to her stance and then back to her face. She remembered the suggestion he had made to her, the one he had thrown out like it was so easy for him like it should be easy for her.

*Tell em what you want* , he had said.

"Uraraka," she said suddenly.

He raised an eyebrow. "Eh?"

"Ochako or Uraraka," she repeated, voice somewhere between an oddly adamant demand and a trembling request. "Please," she added slowly.

He stood there for a moment, the same scowl he always wore but with a certain appraising quality to it, the kind that either frightened a person or made them want to rise to the occasion- to meet the challenge that could be found there.

"Sure thing," he said finally, shrugging his shoulders as if it wasn't a big deal. "See you inside, Uraraka."

He turned and walked back into the dorm without another word. And she wondered that she could ask him that when she could barely look her close friends in the eye and tell them that she didn't want cake.

She couldn't explain it, but when he looked at her, she didn't feel the same crushing weight of his hopes, and dreams, and best possible wishes that she may never be able to reach. His expectations felt clear and obvious; they always were.

Because for Bakugo, everything was clear.

Do.

Do whatever you have to do. Do what you don't think you can do. Just do it.

Be.

Be faster. Be stronger. Be better.

She could wrap her hand around those expectations. And those weren't his expectations for her; those were his expectations for everyone. And that was what she needed right now.

She scoffed and walked up the stairs, trying to quell her boiling blood, to tuck her explosive feelings back into the box.

Those were for her.

But these people deserved the old Ochako. She could give them that today.

She could.

# Fighting Scared

## Chapter Summary

CW: Negative self-talk

Ochako's first day back has some ups and downs. Katsuki is still curious about what's going on in her head. And her friends are worried. Ochako is pissed for most of this chapter.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ochako settled into her bed- easing into it slowly, hair still wet from her shower. She was wrapped in a thick sweater to protect her from the chilled air blowing in through her open balcony door. She had gotten used to keeping it open at home, the fresh air reminding her that she wasn't trapped, that she could step outside any time she wanted; moonlight reminding her that she wasn't back in that box.

But she was also cold- so several layers of clothes and blankets were necessary too. She exhaled slowly and let her body sink into the mattress, worn from all the socializing. Her cheeks hurt, and her muscles ached from being held tight throughout the day. She held her pillow tight and closed her eyes- trying to will herself into rest.

She laid there for about 30 minutes before she gave up and moved to the floor. She gathered several objects, a book, a shoe, a pillow, a shirt, and arranged them around her on the ground.

She knew she wouldn't be able to sleep; the adrenaline of the day still coursing through her body. So she may as well make good use of the time. She had yet to fully replicate, on-demand, what she had done to escape. It had happened a few times while she was practicing at home, but always without rhyme or reason.

She got close every time- but couldn't quite get there. She felt it inside of her though- something had been changed. Something had been altered permanently inside of her, something she hadn't even known was there. It was something she could chase. Something she could fix her eyes on.

She wouldn't be useless again. She would make sure that her quirk, her body, her mind were all submitted to her will. To her power.



And she would never be helpless again.

###

Izuku finished scraping the icing off of a serving platter before loading into the dishwasher and hitting start. It was late, and most of the class had gone to bed, leaving him and Shoto to finish cleaning the remainder of the mess.

“Was the party a success?”

“I...I think so,” he said, his voice inflection matching more of a question than an answer. “It was hard to tell.”

Shoto stood in the middle of the living room, with an open trash bag in one hand as he cleared out red solo cups and plates. “Was it?”

Izuku sighed and leaned against the counter.

“I have...I don’t know, she seemed better but...” Shoto watched him, calm and patient, as Izuku attempted in vain to get his thoughts out. It was a quality of Shoto’s that he could hardly express how much he valued. Shoto did listen, trying with all of his being to understand, even when it didn’t come naturally to him. “She just seemed-.”

“Not better?”

Izuku cocked his head questioningly- interested in what Shoto may have noticed.

“Yeah,” he said. “It was her, but it wasn’t, you know?”

Shoto’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “I think so- it was like someone pretending to be her. Doing their best but falling short.”

Oddly enough, that captured it for Izuku.

“Yeah,” he affirmed, leaning tiredly against the kitchen counter.

“That’s it. I mean, she was trying, but I also wish she didn’t feel like she had to try.”

Shoto shrugged and continued his sweep of the room. “Her alternatives may be too difficult at the moment,” he observed. “I very much doubt she is able to act how she feels right now.”

Izuku knew that Shoto was not without his own trauma, not without his own masks that he had grown so used to wearing. “Your right,”

said Izuku. "I just want to help her."

"You are," assured Shoto, with a confidence that he couldn't possibly have. "You help her by listening and being available as she needs. I know from experience, you're endlessly patient when it comes to waiting on people to discover what they need."

Izuku froze as Shoto continued to move around the room as if he had not just dropped a very intimate bomb on him. He thought again of his conversation with Ochako at the cake table.

*They were friends*, he had insisted.

Right?

He honestly had very little experience with this, not with attraction per se. Attraction was something he knew well, he noticed bodies and cute girls, and he had more than once caught himself admiring both Kacchan's and Iida's physique. But it had always been just that, a moment of noticing that came and went with little thought or worry. He had never allowed himself the time or space to consider what any of it meant.

Never really allowed himself to explore. He was lucky, he knew, to be in a space where he knew he'd be supported unconditionally. But he also found Shoto, somehow, both mercilessly blunt and impossibly hard to read. So it was still a bit scary.

But here he was- all the same- helping Izuku clean up after hours.

Just because.

###

Ochako ran her hands through her messy hair, working the sparse product through the short strands. The woman at the salon had assured her the cut was low maintenance and easy, but that hadn't been her goal- her hair had never been high maintenance. If anything, an unfamiliar style was more maintenance, despite being less hair- but she would get used to it.

She looked at her bedside clock. An hour until class.

That would give her some time to look over her notes again. She had barely slept last night, already anxious that she would return and immediately start floundering. She tried to squash down the feeling that no matter what she did, no matter how hard she worked, she was already too far behind.

She felt her palms begin to sweat and her heart pound, an all too familiar sensation taking hold of her body. It was so...confusing, disorienting, and made her want to scream. This was exactly how she had felt before her first fights (until she learned to shut it off entirely), the same thing she felt while she waited in those rooms- surrounded by the smell of sweat and blood from past usage- until, of course, hands were on her and the nerves and fear and acute awareness of everything, suddenly, went blank.

She knew this wasn't that. In fact, it was the exact opposite. She wanted to be back at school. She knew it. But she didn't feel it in her body and bones, in her blood and skin. All her body felt was a threat, and it had learned what to do with a threat.

She felt it in her throat.

She looked at her notes, at the letters swimming together, filling and falling out of her brain at equal speed. She breathed out, trying to focus, trying to keep the sentences from wobbling in front of her. She breathed out again, trying to expel the anxiety, but it hooked mercilessly into her gut- digging in hard and rooting inside of her.

She could do this.

Her mantra- even before- but now taking on a different flavor in her mouth, a sort of desperation or a naïve hopefulness.

She could go to breakfast; her phone dinged a couple of times, and she was certain it was Deku or Mina or Tsu, asking her if she was coming down to go to the cafeteria with them. She would go, for their sake, but opted for a small breakfast bar. She nibbled at the corner, knowing smaller bites would help with the nausea. She should go see them.

They were worried about her.

She sighed and closed her notes, and shoved them inside of her bag before standing again. She checked herself once more in the mirror. She hadn't arranged to get a new uniform yet, and that was obvious- the collar and the buttons gapped unflatteringly, and her shoulders

got lost in the fabric of her sleeves.

The skirt hung loosely on her hips and fell flat behind her, reaching longer than before without the more prominent curve that used to define her butt. She took two steps toward the door and froze, suddenly, her hand on the doorknob.

The brush of fabric against the back of her legs sent her whole body reeling to a stop as it dragged something out of her, kicking and screaming, that she couldn't quite place, something that made her break out into a cold sweat and her skin crawl. She stepped out, shakily, into the hallway, her steps falling heavy.

First day back, it was good- she assured herself as she made her way down the stairs.

First day back, she wouldn't be derailed by something stupid- whatever the hell *this* was. She hurried through the front door and stepped out into the sun.

First day back, she checked to make sure her breakfast bar was in the pocket of her bag. She had no intention of buying anything at the cafeteria, but she could sit and eat her bar and then walk to class. Her blood pounded in her ears as she crossed the short path to the cafeteria.

*Why? Why did she feel so sick?*

She bent her head down, avoiding eye contact as she passed other students going about their day. She felt another brush against her skin, and she whipped around, ready to slap away a groping hand. But she found that no one was near her, but all the same, she tugged down her skirt.

This stupid skirt.

This stupid fucking skirt.

Her fingers began to shake as she gripped the hem.

She hated it.

Her legs, less thick and now more sinewy, made her want to throw up. She passed through the door into the cafeteria hurriedly.

"Uraraka!"

Her eyes darted up in a panic. Iida and Deku were waving excitedly at her- calling her over. But she couldn't make herself move toward them- she couldn't breathe or think or think about anything other than the fact that she was about to throw up in front of everyone on her first day back. The lights suddenly felt hot, the noises and bustling deafening, and the smells were not helping her nausea- whatever the smells were.

And this stupid skirt.

It felt like sandpaper against her skin.

Why was this happening?

What even was happening?

It was a skirt, an innocent piece of cloth. So why the hell did she want to scream and set the thing on fire?

She saw Deku's smile falter, and he stood slightly, ready to go to her as she stood, no doubt looking ridiculous. She turned on her heels and hurried away toward the bathrooms. She barreled through the door and pushed her way past two confused girls before throwing herself into a stall just in time. No sooner did her knees hit the floor did her body betray her; a familiar cocktail of bile, water, and shame heaving up her throat, soon followed by a sob of frustration.

She slammed the side of her fist hard into the stall.

"No...no...no...no..." the word of protest tumbled out of her mouth in an exhausted whisper. She didn't want this, whatever this was. She wasn't supposed to be this weak.

She stood to her feet; her knees were bending in toward each other as she gripped the handlebars of the stall. She moved to open the door, but her eyes went down to her knees. So knobby and bruised.

*Rest those knees, girl. Don't want to wear them out so early.*

She gagged again as the voice slammed into her memory like a wrecking ball.

She couldn't do this. She couldn't go back out there. She...

She grabbed her phone out of her bag and shakily sent a text- hoping she could catch her before class started. She waited about a minute in

the stall before her phone dinged. She let out a sigh of relief.

**Momo: Of course. Give me one moment and I'll be right there.**

Ochako let out a sigh of relief and leaned against the wall, hugging her bag tight. The door opened and closed a few times before she heard Momo's tentative voice.

"Uraraka?"

Ochako opened the door to her stall, a crack. Momo moved closer.

"What do you need, Uraraka," she asked, her voice low and intent. Ochako's face turned red, and she looked down from Momo's compassionate gaze.

"Can..." it came out in a strangled bark. "Can you make me some..." Ochako rubbed the back of her head. "...some pants?"

"Pants?"

"Yeah," she said. "Like-uh-slacks. Something uniform compliant?" And Ochako could have kissed the beautiful girl right then and there because all she did was nod, no questions asked.

"Of course," she said. "Easy as pie."

Momo disappeared into the stall beside her. Ochako could hear her shuffling as Momo prepared to use her quirk.

"Thank you, Momo," she whispered. "I really appreciate it."

"It's not a problem," she returned. "I'm happy to help."

Ochako held herself tighter, trying to stay her trembling body. "All right," said Momo, passing a pair of nice black slacks under the stall. "Freshly pressed."

Ochako reached down and took them shakily, sitting for a moment in the crouched position, holding the slacks tightly to her chest.

"Ochako..." she closed her eyes tight. "Are you...do you need anything?"

"No," she choked out. "I'll talk to the school about getting a couple of pairs. I just...I didn't think of it...but...the skirt..." Was just a skirt. Just a scrap of fabric. She didn't know how to explain this to the girl

in the stall beside her.

“It’s okay,” said Momo from the other side. “It really is. We’re all here for you.” Ochako dropped her chin to her chest. She squeezed her eyes shut and held the slacks tighter. “You’re not alone.”

Ochako wanted to say something, to accept her kind words, to manage anything other than a strangled, “thank-you.” She stood and quickly changed out of her skirt and tights and into her pants. She thought for a moment of leaving her skirt in the trash, but her frugal side wouldn’t let her throw away perfectly good clothes. The thought comforted her somewhat- like happening upon something comfortable and familiar.

She felt better, even if she was technically out of uniform and more conspicuous. She felt a little safer.

“Are those gonna work, Uraraka?”

Ochako stepped out and readjusted her shirt and her jacket. It wasn’t flattering, but she could not care less about that. It was functional- that was all she needed.

“Thank you, Momo,” she said. “I really appreciate it. These are perfect.”

###

Katsuki had no patience for idiocy on good days. And it wasn’t a good day- not a particularly bad day- but not a good day, so his patience levels were not particularly high as he made his way to the homeroom.

He was often one of the first to get to class, finding no reason to waste his time chatting it up in the hallway, especially in the morning. He woke up early enough to work-out and get ready for the day, but that didn’t mean he was a morning person, and it was definitely his least favorite time of day to deal with his idiot peers.

As students began to filter in slowly ahead of the bell and he was prepared to shut out their obnoxious voices, but somehow, as the slimiest often do, a voice, bitching and moaning, managed to slink its

way into his ears.

This was not inherently unusual, and he was prepared to act a goddamn peach and ignore it altogether, but he didn't manage to get his headphones in time before he heard what the little shit was crying about.

"Did you see it, my dudes," he lamented dramatically to an annoyed Tape-Face and a somewhat uncomfortable Pikachu. "Pants!" He let out an exasperated sigh and flung himself onto this desk. "Pants! No skirt!"

Katsuki sunk lower into his seat, molars grinding painfully. Was the little creep always this loud? Or was Katsuki just paying closer attention? Katsuki looked up briefly to scan who was in the classroom and then back over to the small group. To his credit, Pikachu seemed to be attempting to get the little shit stain to at least lower his voice.

"This sets a dangerous precedent, gentleman," the rat continued, raising his hand in the air. "This robs us of one of the few joys that our dangerous lives afford us!"

"Dude, come on..." started Pikachu, making a slow down gesture-looking around the classroom nervously.

"Isn't it a violation of dress-code," Grape-Face grumbled. "If Uraraka starts covering up those sexy legs, then who is next?! Momo?! Mina?! There will be a revolution, and we males will suffer for it!"

Katsuki wasn't sure when he stood up from his desk, but it was somewhere between Pikachu turning a bright red, stressed that one of the mentioned girls would arrive in the classroom at any moment, and Tape-Face actually raising his voice to chill out the pencil-dicked douche-canoe.

But Katsuki wasn't so calm as Tape-Face. He didn't care for polite warnings and opted for the more direct approach of grabbing the little prick on the back of his neck and slamming his face down, hard, into his desk with a loud crack (from either his nose or the wood- Katsuki wasn't sure and would be pleased with either).

Pikachu winced, and Tape-Face jumped back as if to get out of dodge.

"Woa...Bakugo," said Pikachu. "Don't hurt him, dude! He's just kidding."



Katsuki responded by grinding the maggots face into the desk harder before leaning in close to his ear.

“Listen here, you fuckin’ pervert,” he growled.

“Dude, let me go,” he whimpered in return.

Katsuki loosened his grip on his neck, and Mineta let out a sigh of relief, only to be slammed back down into the desk again.

“It was a joke,” he sputtered out in a panic, provoking Katsuki to tighten his grip.

“I don’t give a flying fuck if you were kidding,” he said, voice low and lethal. “I don’t know how the fuck you’ve managed to stay in this program, but you’re gonna keep your disgusting thoughts to yourself, yeah?”

The blubbering idiot whimpered wetly against the desk.

“Dude, why are you being like this...”

“I don’t want to hear any jokes,” continued Katsuki. “I don’t wanna see you look, leer, or fucking touch anyone who doesn’t fucking want you to, you shit-spackled Muppet.” He leaned in closer, sneering at his own proximity to the asshole. “And if you do, I promise you, I can make a practice accident hurt like hell, and you won’t ever even have to entertain the impossibility of a girl actually even wanting to touch your tootsie-roll dick because it won’t be a fucking option.”

He whimpered at the threat and nodded pitifully. Katsuki straightened and took his hand off the back of the idiot’s neck to find Pikachu, Tape-Face, and even Bird-Brain looking at him, the latter of whom seemed almost bored.

“Calm down, dude,” said Pikachu. “It was just a joke.”

Katsuki was about ready to kick Pikachu’s seat out from under him. A little less of a beating than he had given to Grapes-for-Balls, Pikachu may not be his favorite person either, but he also wasn’t a fucking sex offender either.

But before he could do anything, Bird-Brain decided to open his beak.

“Then perhaps,” he said, turning in his desk to look at them. “We should all be more considerate of the jokes we allow to be told and

how they might make our female classmates feel.”

Big Bird didn't speak often, and when he did, people tended to listen- if for no other reason because you never knew what exactly was going to come out of his mouth. But Katsuki was truly ready to turn and be done with the whole thing, especially before a bigger audience entered the room, trusting that his warning to the little creep had been enough, but then he heard the muttering behind him.

“Jeez,” he pouted. “A student goes missing for a few weeks, and everyone loses their sense of humor.”

Fuck it- no one would miss the little fucker.

Katsuki's hand grabbed Pervy by the shoulder and flung him out of the chair and into the wall, held aloft by Katsuki's hold on his collar.

“Help,” screamed the Purple Smurf, kicking wildly against the wall. “Kaminari! Sero! Bros!”

Big Bird was reclining in his seat, acting as if he hadn't heard anything, as if he could care less that a murder may be about to happen in his classroom. He always was good at minding his own damn business- one of the few things that Katsuki took the time to appreciate about a person.

Katsuki was seconds away from form scorching the wall and the little shit pinned to it. He probably won't kill him; just send him to the recovery girl. He congratulated himself inwardly at his restraint, but before he could set off the minor explosion, the spark died in his palm.

He let out a low growl and turned to face the front of the class, where Aizawa was staring him down.

“Bakugo,” he said with a bored warning in his voice, not particularly earnest. His teacher always looked exhausted, but the past few weeks had been next-level, and it didn't seem like he had recovered yet. “I'd rather not,” was the only explanation he offered.

Katsuki dropped Mineta to the ground and whipped around to stalk back to his seat. “Then do your fucking job and keep his ass in check,” he barked over his shoulder. He didn't give a fuck how tired Eraserhead was.

Katsuki did feel like he was taking crazy pills right now. He didn't feel

like he was acting exceptionally out of character, and yet everyone was looking at him like he wasn't always just a few seconds away from ripping their heads off.

He supposed the cause for his outburst was a little out of the ordinary. He, along with everyone else in this place, had put up with Mineta's gross behavior. Sure, Tape-Face occasionally took him to task, and Four-Eyes would lecture him about respect for women, but for the most part, they all treated it like white noise at this point.

But still- if Uraraka was covering up and avoiding touch like the fucking plague, then it wasn't a stretch to assume some real shitty stuff went down, stuff that shouldn't be made fucking worse by a pervy classmate. And yeah, maybe someone other than that brat from training camp should have beat Mineta down at least once before now, but hey...better late than never.

So he doesn't get why they are side-eyeing him now.

But he didn't fucking care about what they thought. He cared about fucking fairness, and a hero with a fuck-ton of potential shouldn't be railroaded at a vulnerable moment. She shouldn't be coddled either, and he was the last to say someone should hold her hand and baby her through this (especially if she still wanted to be a hero), but being sabotaged by her own classmate?

Nah. That he wouldn't let slide.

"Uraraka..."

He looked up briefly at the sound of Aizawa calling her name as she entered the classroom alongside Icy-hot, Four-Eyes, and Deku. She broke away from her friends and approached their teacher. It was, he observed, an odd change in her posture toward their sensei. In many ways, she seemed to have shrunk in on herself in settings she normally wouldn't. And there was once a time when she would have jumped at the sound of Aizawa calling her name- intimidated by the one-on-one attention. But now, like so many things, it was the exact opposite. She stood straight and rigid as her teacher told her whatever it was that he was saying in his hushed discreet tone. Her hands formed tight fists at her side, and he could see the tight hold of her jaw- a tell-tale sign of frustration.

She said something back to him- curt and cold- before nodding stiffly and turning to return to her seat, and he could've sworn he saw a strategically timed eye roll meant for her teacher. His eyes went down

immediately as she took her seat a few rows away from him. She opened her bag and pulled out a binder.

His binder.

He doesn't know why it makes him look away again and sends a blush creeping up his neck. He knew she had been reading them- why would he be surprised.

“Whoa! What happened to you?!”

Katsuki turned toward Shitty Hair's voice as he entered- always right before the bell.

“Nothing,” muttered Mineta, wiping the remaining blood from his nose. “Freaking Lord Explosion Murder went berserk on me for a joke.”

He settled slightly, sinking into his seat when he was sure Mineta wasn't going to announce to the classroom the nature of his joke. It seemed he at least had enough sense and fear of Katsuki's wrath to keep his mouth shut.

The bell rang, and class finally started, but Katsuki also noticed that Uraraka had turned to get a look at Mineta, and even though Katsuki's a few seats behind her- he was certain that he could see a small smirk playing at the corner of her mouth.

###

By the fourth teacher of the day looking at her with those sad eyes and a whispered assurance that she can feel free to take her time and ease back in- Ochako was ready to hit something.

Or someone.

She was itching to move, to focus, to feel tension and pain, to get all of this bleeding frustration out. When Deku tentatively asked her if she had eaten anything at lunch, she had to actively keep herself from biting his head off.

“I had one of my granola bars and a banana,” she said, smiling in a way that she hoped was placating. She could tell he wanted to say more but- bless him- he nodded. And now she was excited for the first

time in a long time- ready to do something familiar, prepared to prove that she didn't need to be handled with kid gloves.

All-Might didn't stop her and ask if she wanted to go slow as she entered into Advanced Combat- so when she went to her mat with her first sparring partner of the day- ready to put All-Might's techniques into practice- she was in a better mood than she had been in weeks.

No quirks- but that was fine. She assured her gloves were in place, blocking any accidental activation before she faced off with Momo.

It was a fun match- it got her heart rate up and her blood pumping. Momo's height gave her an advantage, but Ochako had become quick over the past few months, swiftly getting the upper hand on Momo.

She was feeling lighter on her feet, a bit more comfortable in her skin, and like she was finally breaking through that thick fog of exhaustion that had followed her around all day.

She was feeling good.

Real good until...

Until she easily subdued Sero.

Until she much to quickly got the upper-hand on Sato.

Until Iida didn't even get a hand on her.

And by the time she had pinned Kirishima- who at least attempted to be subtle with his gentleness- tears of frustration and disappointment fell her cheek and splattered against the mat as she rolled off of the red-head hero.

If he saw, he didn't say anything.

She felt different as she moved to the next mat- all of her excitement had depleted, and instead, she was feeling pathetic and small.

Useless.

Like she had in that fucking cage.

Like she had when Li didn't come back, and there was nothing she could do about it.

She quickly wiped the tears away and choked back the rest that

threatened to spill.

“Ochako...” she tensed and jerked away from the brush of a hand on her shoulder. “Ochako, are you okay?”

Deku’s voice was so sweet and ached for her, but she wanted to slap his hand away and yell at him.

Yell what?

He hadn’t done anything wrong, but all the same, her heart lashed out at him in resentment and anger.

“She’s fucking fine, Shitty Nerd. Get back to your own opponent, eh?”

She could feel Deku’s gaze on her, waiting expectantly. She looked over her shoulder briefly at the green-haired boy, offering him a weak smile. “I’m good, Deku,” she said. “Thank you.” She turned back to face her next opponent. Bakugo was standing, barefoot and stern at the other side of the mat, not a far cry out from the face he had worn at the Sport’s Festival.

That was fine by her because that excitement had been easily burned down to anger over the past few sparring rounds.

Anger that she couldn’t speak.

Anger that she couldn’t scream.

Anger that was settling in her belly like a coiled cobra.

So it was certainly fine by her that Bakugo looked like he would have no qualms kicking her ass. And he does not- if his quick start and strike were any indication. His foot connected painfully with her stomach, and she felt an intense relief as the pain radiated through her body.

He struck again, not giving her time to recover, but this time she caught his wrist before he could land the blow. She managed to wrench his arm back as she spun around him, but she could only hold her grip for a moment before he jerked away from her.

She wasn’t going to beat him- she knew that, but that wasn’t her goal- not really. Her goal was to dig- to push, to feel that rush of heat; to ache, to bruise, to feel; to see how far back he could bend her arm, or twist her leg, to see how much pain she could withstand before

tapping out.

She moved faster.

She punched harder.

She kicked higher.

Until she could see the light sheen of sweat on his brow. She threw punches and kicks until he had her on the ground, one hand pressed hard between her shoulder blades, the other one twisting her arm back and up, not enough to dislocate it (it was just a spar after all) but hard enough to hurt- hard enough to remind her that he could if he wanted to.

“Hey...” she vaguely heard a voice from somewhere else. “Hey, come on, man, cool it...”

Maybe it was Kirishima? She couldn't really tell because all she could concentrate on was the fact that she couldn't move; that she was pinned, and that she was about to lose- which meant she was about to die.

Her body responded with a violent thrash, not enough to dislodge him from where he was perched on the curve of her back, but it was enough to get him to let go (though she suspected he did that so he wouldn't break her arm), and it was enough to twist her hips so she was slightly on her side creating enough space for her to wiggle a leg free.

“Bakugo, Uraraka,” called All-Might. “Remember it's just a spar, no need to...”

She brought her free leg up and hooked it around his torso, using her body weight to roll and knock him off of her. She rolled with him, grappling for the upper hand, but once again, she found herself on her back, both of her wrists pinned above her head.

She thrust upward, hard and quick, knocking him slightly off balance and freeing one of her hands. She managed to get her free arm around his torso and tried to pull herself back up, ignoring his harsh vice-like grip on her other wrist, keeping her pinned. He used his other hand to shove her back down, his forearm hard at the base of her throat.

“You wanna tap out, Uraraka?”

There was smirk there, but he was not grinning like a feral gremlin, and he asked it with a lowered voice- something between a taunt and an inquiry. Like he was testing if she did, in fact, want him to let up on her. She didn't deign to respond. Instead, she wrapped her free leg around his waist and used it to pull herself forward, head-butting him hard. He reared back, surprised.

It was a moment to breathe, a moment of safety.

But she couldn't take it.

She rushed to her next move, rolling to her knees and throwing herself at him hard, but he easily caught her and flung her off of him, sending her flying across the mat. She jumped to her feet and charged at him again. This time he used her forward momentum to maneuver behind her and get her in a tight headlock.

She immediately rag-dolled and reached back between her own legs to grab him behind the knee as she pitched forward as hard as she could into a tumble, taking him with her. He crashed painfully into the back of her head, but she rolled forward until his body flipped over hers and slammed into the mat, this time, her thighs tight around his neck. He laid there for a moment, taking a heaving breath as she squeezed tighter.

He managed to work his hand under her ankle and used his grip there to twist his body over and up so that he was on his knees, but her thighs kept their grip, holding him close to the mat. But it took him only a few seconds to muscle his way out, and then- freakishly fast- he had rolled on his knees behind her. She tried to duck away from him, but his forearm barred across her throat as he got her in another headlock.

She knew she would be able to loosen the hold he had on his wrist- keeping it in place.

"All right, young heroes," boomed All-Might. "I think that's..."

She thrashed wildly against him, trying to throw herself back to throw him off balance and trying to fling herself forward, but he managed to get both legs up and around her and rocked back until he was on his back. She thrashed and fought against the cage of his arms and legs, but there was nowhere to go.

She was trapped.



She couldn't get out.

She clawed wildly at his arms, pulling and jerking at him, but his headlock was merciless.

Her body started to shake. It had never gotten this close in the dome, and a sobering, horrifying thought settled into her mind. She hadn't "won" any of her fights because she was strong- she was alive because everyone else had been weak.

Just like her.

Had anyone of them been like Bakugo or Kirishima or Deku, or Iida, she would have died there. She had just gotten lucky that none of them were fighters- they were orphans and underfed captives. She let out a feral yell and flung herself back one more time and continued to tear and pull at his arms, trying and failing to dislodge him, to undo the lock- though she was fairly certain she was losing oxygen if the little pinholes of light were any indicator.

And then, suddenly, almost too suddenly, his arms went slack over her shoulders. She had thought for a moment that he was just releasing her, letting her go because she was clearly a garbage competitor who he had no reason to waste any more time on. I wasn't until she heard the light gasping behind her and the thundering in her ears, the familiar rush of blood and adrenaline through her body, the surge of power, that she realized what was happening.

Bakugo was face down in the mat, trying desperately to push himself up on his shaking arms. As if something was pushing down on him.

"Shit!"

"Young Uraraka, no quirks..."

She ignored All-Might while she hurriedly took her gloves off. "What the fuck, Uraraka," gasped Bakugo. She was pretty sure she heard Deku telling All-Might that she usually required her finger pads to activate her quirk.

"Release," she yelled, pressing her fingers together. Bakugo pushed himself up off the mat and rolled onto his back.

"Oh my god, Bakugo." She dropped to her knees beside him. "I'm so sorry! I have no idea what happened. The gloves should have...I..."

Bakugo went up onto his knees and rolled out his neck. He didn't look particularly put out, though. "Whatever," he said. "It's not a fucking big deal."

"Actually," piped up Deku, garnering a snort from Katsuki. "It's a fascinating development of her quirk." Ochako closed her eyes and exhaled. "If Uraraka can activate her quick without making contact it..."

"Can you nerd out later," barked Bakugo, standing to his feet and raising his shirt to wipe away the sweat on his forehead. Ochako would have normally taken a moment of pride at seeing the sweat there, but she was otherwise occupied with what the hell had happened.

"Did I win," asked Bakugo. "You know, seeing as Uraraka cheated?"

She stood up abruptly and scowled at him. "Hey, I didn't cheat!"

"Well," said Deku with a shrug. "Technically..."

"I think this is a time when we don't need to commentate," whispered Shoto.

"Fine," she admitted. "I cheated, but it was an accidental cheat." She moved to the edge of the mat and flopped down to grab her water bottle. "And of course, you won. I wasn't getting out of the last hold."

She took a drink of her water, hoping her casual conversation would distract her clearly worried peers. She looked down and shook out her shaking hands and closed her eyes tight. Of course they were concerned. Why wouldn't they be? She had always needed to touch something to activate her quirk. Well, she supposed they were touching- he had been choking the life out of her, but her hands had been covered.

She did remember waking up to half her room on the ceiling, but she had just assumed she had accidentally activated her quirk in the middle of a nightmare. It wouldn't have been the first time.

"You could've gotten out," he said. She looked up, surprised to find him still listening. He was sitting at the end of the mat, a few feet away from her. "You're faster than the last time we found," he said. "If you had kept your damn head, you probably could've avoided the headlock altogether."

Her brows furrowed, and she looked up at him. Her classmates were beginning to disperse back to their mats for their own water break, but Bakugo was still there.

“What do you mean,” she asked, a defensive snap to her voice.

He took a drink of his water, unphased by her tone. “I mean, you fought like your fucking life depended on it- like a dog with a bone.”

She snorted. “Is that bad?”

“Against an average opponent, sure, grit and fearlessness are enough,” he said. “Not against me. Not when you fight like that.”

Of course not. He wasn’t an average opponent. He wasn’t some orphan kid snatched off the street and flung into a ring to fight for their life. She exhaled slowly and looked down at the sweat-dabbled mat.

He was right. She knew that.

“How,” she asked him, her voice quiet.

“Eh?”

Her body was starting to ache again- a pleasant feeling- as the adrenaline dissipated. “How do you stay focused? How do you keep from...”

She doesn’t know how to finish the question. She doesn’t even know the question she is asking. But she knows the answer. He can...she can’t...because...

He’s stronger.

He’s faster.

He’s bigger.

He isn’t...

She shook her head and looked down.

“Nevermind.”

She sat for another couple of seconds, looking up at him briefly through her bangs, he looked like he was about to say something, but then All-Might stepped forward, casting a long shadow over her.

“Young Uraraka,” he said. “Might I have a word?”

She looked up at him, surprised. Why was he talking to her? Again, she was not Deku or Bakugo or Todoroki. What possible reason could he have to talk to her? It wasn't that she didn't respect him, but she didn't spend her childhood chasing after him, and she certainly wasn't used to having his attention. She fell safely in the upper-middle of her class- not low enough to be a special project but not high enough to be noticed by the former number one hero.

But everything was different now.

She stood to face him, the abrupt movement making her dizzy.

“Are you all right?”

She nodded, finding her footing. “Yeah, I'm fine.”

“Come,” he said, gesturing for her to follow him. “Walk with me.”

He was looking at her with that warm smile, but also with a concern that set her teeth on edge and once against sparked that flame of frustration- seemingly never really going out.

##

“Are you kidding me?”

Ochako had never considered herself an angry person- quite the opposite, actually. Most people would call her sweet, kind, and laid-back. But she had never wanted to punch so many people at once in her whole life. She had never had to choke on so many ugly emotions at once.

And right now, she was positively shaking inside of her skin- certain she was about to set her chair on fire.

“Remember,” said Nezu- she had seen more of him this last month than she had seen in her whole UA career. “This is not a punishment, and nor is it permanent.”

She looked down at her hands and pushed out a strangled breath through her teeth. She could hear the blood thundering in her ears.

“So...why...” she choked out.

“It’s a precaution,” said All-Might. “Until you get your quirk under control.” She could hear the “and” in his voice. She continued to look down at her lap, her hands bunching the fabric of her too-big pants. “And until we are sure that you can fight safely.”

A flash.

A bang.

And it was like her body was outside of her control, acting on an impulse that she had no say over, because, quite suddenly, she was standing on quaking knees, gripping the edge of her principal’s desk. She looked to the right where All-might was standing against the wall- and to the left of him where Aizawa stood. Nezu, for his part, sat calmly, showing little change in demeanor at her outburst.

She wanted to scream.

Short, staccato spurts of air escaped her lips- her lungs failing to take in more to replace it. Her vision narrowed into tiny pinpricks of darkness.

“Young Uraraka, this...”

Her gaze snapped up toward the most popular hero of all time, and it was nothing short of withering.

“What...” she interrupted, voice low and icy. “Will I be doing in place of it? Sitting on my hands and cheering on my classmates?” Her tone was scathing, and she could see the sadness in All-might’s eyes and the unusual appraisal in Aizawa’s.

“No,” said Nezu. “You will be participating in private lessons in place of Advance Combat.” He gestured in the direction she really didn’t want him to. “With Aizawa- sensei to explore your quirk and it’s new evolutions.”

She bit back a hiss of displeasure.

“Quirks evolve,” she said. “Does everyone get special lessons for it?”

“When that quirk involves manipulation of one of the powerful forces in the universe,” said Aizawa. “Then, yes.”

She scoffed slightly. She had never been considered more powerful than half of her classmates by anyone in this room- somehow making

the statement ring hallow. She couldn't tell what was prompting this whole thing- unrelenting pity or fear that she could snap at any moment. Was it because they knew what she had been through or because they knew what she had done? Was she pathetic? Or was she dangerous?

She couldn't tell. And she wasn't sure which one she preferred.

"Fine," she hissed. She turned and grabbed her bag from beside the chair. It was all she could say. She had come back ready...ready to get better and stronger and fast; she had wanted to be untouchable, and suddenly she was in remedial courses like some kind of first year who didn't know how to manage her quirks. She gave the door a hard slam on her way out.

If Bakugo could threaten everyone and their mother, she could slam a door if she wanted.

Fuck this.

Fuck them.

Fuck Aizawa-Sensei.

She was so angry that she couldn't see straight, see straight, or walk straight.

She had to do this. She could this. Prove that she was strong, that they were wrong about her. She wasn't weak. She would prove that she could still be a hero. It was the only thing mattered.

###

"Have you heard from Ochako yet," asked Tsu, prompting Izuku to look up from his textbook and look down at his phone for the 4th time in as many minutes.

"No," he answered, raking a hand through his hair. "I texted her to see if she would be around for dinner, but I haven't seen her since combat class."

"That was pretty intense," said Tsu. "Do you think she's okay?"

“It does no good to speculate,” interrupted Shoto, in his blunt way. “Uraraka is dealing with something deeply personal and, likely, unknowable by us. She is coping with it as best as she can...what did you get on number seven?”

“I know that,” said Izuku, ignoring his question. “But we are her friends. We can’t just sit back and let...”

“You don’t have the power to let her do anything,” interjected Shoto. “None of us do. We can be there as a friend, observe if she becomes a danger to herself, but other than that, there is little help we are qualified to give her aside from being there should she need us.”

Izuku paused and looked at Shoto for a moment. “Wow, Shoto,” he said. “That was really insightful.”

“I’ve been reading up on how to support those coping with trauma,” he said off-handedly. “I clearly upset you with some of my missteps with Uraraka, and while the nature of her trauma remains ambiguous, there seem to be some translatable principles. Now...” he pointed back down at his book. “Number seven.”

“That very thorough,” said Tsu.

“Not really,” he said with a shrug. “Just a couple of articles. So, I think for this problem...”

Izuku stopped listening, suddenly distracted with the overwhelming swell of affection, a type that was almost exclusively associated with Shoto Todoroki- almost like a stirring surprise, sudden and unexpected- different than the reliant and expected affection he had for his friends- it was doused with intrigue, curiosity, and admiration. He blinked away his tears before Shoto saw them.

It was odd that someone so subdued could speak to Izuku’s emotional extremes in such an effective way. He balanced him well, that was for certain. It was hard for Izuku to wait, to sit back and watch his friend suffer. He wanted to protect, to save, to make her smile- he wanted to be a hero. Every instinct of his screamed for that.

But right now- he couldn’t.

He didn’t know how to save Ochako, or protect her, or make her smile.

The threat wasn’t immediate.

But the need didn't go away.

And having someone like Shoto there to remind him of that- that what he may need to do might not be what Ochako needed right now- was important. And it was a comfort him- Shoto's presence was warming and consistent right now, as he maneuvered his still-growing powers; the growing pressure of being All-Might's successor; and now his near-constant worry over Ochako.

"Ochako!"

He jumped up as if suddenly being caught with his hand in the cookie jar as Ochako entered the dorms- closing the door behind her.

"Hey, guys..."

Izuku had to actively repress the wince at the hallow tenor of her voice. She walked toward them, face red and shirt soaked with sweat.

"Have you been training, Uraraka," asked Shoto.

"Oh no," she said. "Just went on a run." She looked past them briefly toward the stairs, as if she wanted to bolt, but instead took a tentative step toward them.

"Did...did you have diner," asked Izuku, and when he saw the clench of her fist, he barreled forward quickly. "Because I made extra. It's in the fridge if you want any."

She looked down at him for a moment. Her eyes were almost bloodshot, her fresh pale scar standing out on her exertion-reddened skin. She looked so...absent.

"Thanks, Deku," she said.

"Do you want to study with us," offered Tsu. Deku watched her closely- observing- it was what he did best, and maybe Shoto was right. Maybe it was all he could do right now. Her eyes flickered to the books. They twitched slightly, a furrow forming briefly in her brow.

"Sure," she said finally, not necessarily reluctant, but devoid of enthusiasm. "I'm going to go shower real quick, and then I'll join you."

Tsu nodded happily, but Izuku watched her leave. It was so hard to



watch. It was as if he was looking at someone who was trying and failing, desperately, to be Ochako. Almost as if it were Toga pretending- except Toga probably emoted more when she pretended to be the hero. Izuku took cues from watching emotions and faces and body posture- but all of it was missing- leaving him flailing for what to mirror back to her.

“That’s good,” said Tsu, after Ochako was out of earshot. “She wants to hang out with us. That’s good.”

###

Katsuki knew he had a reputation- being in bed at 9 pm was one of those things that kept the expectations to socialize at bay. It got people off his back about game nights, bonding, and shit he had zero fucking interest in.

So when he heard a knock on his door at 8:50 pm, he felt mighty magnanimous that he didn’t scream at the intruder to eat shit and die.

Growth, Kirishima would call it.

Whatever.

But he sure as fuck wasn’t gonna smile, and whoever it was on the other side would certainly be on the receiving end of his death glare. “The fuck do you-.”

He didn’t have time to finish his question because before his door was even open all the way, a short, angry blur all but shoved past him out of the hallways and into the room.

“What the fucking fuck are you doing?”

He whipped around to face Uraraka and was hit by an intense wave of anger coming from her- as if *she* hadn’t just bulldozed past him and into *his* room...

The fucking nerve.

“What did you mean,” she choked out as if the words pained her.

“What the hell do you mean?”

She growled and rolled her eyes with all the audacity of someone who

DID NOT take all the fucking liberties he was certain that he had never given her.

“At the fight...”

And fuck, if he were given to being intimidation, if he were one of her fucking nerdy friends, he might have stepped back because she was a black hole of concentrated anger. But he wasn't one of them; he was Katsuki Bakugo, so she didn't scare him. He moved to close the door, but his hand paused on the knob at the faintest hitch in her breathing.

And, yes, she was the one who blew past him like a wrecking ball, but he clearly left it open enough for her to see before he stepped past her and moved to his desk, creating a clear path for her to the door.

“You'll have to refresh my memory on that,” he said.

She turned to face him; her body, her stance, all were an odd mix of offensive and defensive like she couldn't choose between the two.

“You said I fight like...” He raised an eyebrow and rested his palms on his desk, and leaned into it.

“Like a cornered animal?”

She scoffed but didn't say anything to protest.

“Yes,” she said with a slow nod. “And that's bad?”

“Sometimes,” he said. “Against me? Yeah.”

“Why?” The question was barbed, but he wasn't sure if she even knew that anymore. “You fight angry all the time,” she continued. “Why is it bad when I do it?”

Katsuki waited for her to continue, but it was like every word was hooking painfully in her throat, unable to be fully worked out. Like something was caught cut off between her brain and her tongue, and if her glare was any indicator, it was frustrating as fuck.

“Because you fight like you're afraid you're gonna lose,” he said.

He saw her jaw jump.

“I'm not afraid,” she all but yelled.

“Tch...you fight like you're afraid.”

“Whatever,” she said. She moved toward the door-clearly unhappy with his answer. Whatever, it wasn’t like he cared. She could be angry at him, it didn’t make what he said any less true, and she was the one who burst into his room uninvited demanding answers.

“I’m not afraid of you,” she insisted.

He scoffed. “Oh, trust me, Uraraka,” he said. “I haven’t thought that since our first year.” She looked up at him abruptly, her brow knotted in confusion. “But you still fought like you were afraid you were gonna lose to me, and it made you fight desperate.” She exhaled slowly, her knuckles turning white as she clenched her fist. “You didn’t fight like you were afraid at the Sport’s Festival.”

She scoffed and looked at him, exhaustion and fire fighting in her eyes. “I’m stronger than I was then,” she said, almost desperate, almost a question.

“Yeah,” he agreed casually. “Didn’t say you weren’t...”

She turned to look at him again. He could see the sweat drying with dirt and bark on her arms and forehead; had she been outside?

Her lips parted as though she were about to say something but then quieted, and he was beginning to get exhausted by this push and pull that was coming off of her. Finally, she stepped back and grabbed the doorknob, opening it further.

“Thanks,” she mumbled before hurrying out the door- leaving Katsuki confused and alone.

What the fuck?

He should be mad- and he wasn’t so sure that he wasn’t- but he had his own confusing push and pull as well. They weren’t really friends, so why had she come to him? Why had she come to his room? Why was she so fucking angry when they fought? Why did she look at him like she was a hairsbreadth away from punching him, but all mannequin smiles with her besties?

And, most pressing of all, why hadn’t he kicked her out?

They weren’t friends, he reminded himself. He had gone above and beyond as a good peer, and now he could go back to focusing on what mattered.

Being number one.

Nothing had changed that.

###

Ochako wondered just how long she could sit in silence, listening to the clock ticking on the wall. It had felt like ages, but according to said clock, it had been 5 minutes.

Shit.

“Why...why aren’t you asking me any questions?”

The woman sitting across from her leaned forward slightly. “I did, Ochako.”

Ochako’s face scrunched in confusion. “What?”

“I asked you how your day was.”

Dr. Shoko Ogasawara- Shoko- she insisted to Ochako- was an older woman, possibly early sixties, with lovely black hair and kind eyes. She supposed that was a prerequisite for his line of work. Though she did seem grounded, not too sweet or saccharine in her voice or demeanor.

“I said it was good,” said Ochako, holding her arms tight across her waist- gripping her forearms.

Shoko nodded. “And then you went somewhere. Does that happen often?”

“I didn’t go anywhere,” she said.

Shoko sat again in silence, this time for a good 3 minutes before Ochako spoke up. “I thought shrinks were supposed to be chatty,” she muttered.

“Would you like me to be?”

“I...no,” said Ochako. “I just...”

Sitting in quiet was suffocating for her now. Painful. Quiet was fine if she could train or practice, but hushed dead silence made her feel

physically pained.

“I don’t really know why I’m here,” she said, her voice heavy. “I feel like this is a waste.”

Ochako looked up to see if Shoko responded in any way, but she remained calm and attentive.

“You don’t think you need therapy?”

Ochako shrugged. “I don’t know...I...I’m alive.”

One true thing.

She knew that much, at least.

“Yes,” said Shoko. “You are alive. Most people who need therapy are very alive.” Ochako snorted, almost a laugh.

“I guess you want me to tell you what happened?”

Shoko held her gaze, Ochako looked down at her hands. “Is that what you want to talk about?”

“Want,” asked Ochako. “I don’t want any of this.”

Shoko nodded, a flicker of understanding that made Ochako bristle as if she had shared more than she had meant to share.

“Then let’s not talk about that yet,” said Shoko casually, sitting back in the chair. “You said you were alive. What did you mean?”

“What do *you* mean,” pressed Ochako. “I’m alive. I could’ve died many times, but that’s no different than regular hero work, so I don’t know why I’m here.”

Shoko raised a skeptical eyebrow. “You don’t?” It invited a response, or it didn’t.

“I know it is,” exhaled Ochako. “But I don’t know why?”

“Well,” said Shoko. “Maybe we can spend some time on that when you’re ready.”

Ochako swallowed hard and leaned heavily into her chair. Her eyes swept over the room, not landing on Dr. Ogasawara, instead opting to focus on the calming sage color of the wall, the bookshelf, the desk, a

little crowded and cluttered.

She liked that.

“Ochako, do you notice that?”

Ochako turned back toward her, her hands clutching the armrest of her chair. “What,” she barked.

“You aren’t breathing?”

Ochako recoiled- still holding tight to her chair. “Yes, I am,” she barked defensively, drawing in a deep breath.

Shoko didn’t even bother pretending to believe her lie. “I want you to pay attention to that, Ochako,” she said. “Pay attention to your breathing- see what you begin to notice.”

“I know how to breathe,” she grumbled, raising her chin to glare at the woman. “I don’t need help breathing.”

“What do you need?”

Ochako was ready, poised to retort, but when she went to grab, to wrap her fingers around such a simple answer, she found it was like grabbing hold of vapor.

“I...” she stuttered. “I...I need to leave all this behind so I can start to move on.”

“All of what?”

Ochako didn’t bother repressing the eyeroll. “All this,” she snapped, gesturing around her. “To forget it all and get back to normal. So just tell me what I have to do.” She felt dizzy, and her head was beginning to pound mercilessly. “If talking about it gets this done faster, then I’ll talk about it. I was kidnapped, caged, forced to...”

“Ochako,” interrupted Shoko, holding up a hand. “Talking about it when you aren’t prepared for the way those memories may overwhelm you is not helpful. In fact, it’s counterproductive and could set you back.”

“I’m not overwhelmed,” she shouted.

She wasn’t.

She could rattle off every detail if it got her out of here.

“Talk therapy is not the end all be all,” said Shoko. “In fact, I would prefer we built to that after gaining a better understanding of your emotions, your body, your coping, and the like.”

Ochako deflated in her chair.

“Why do I get the feeling that will take even longer.”

“It’s harder work for sure.” Shoko leaned forward in her chair- a resolute strength in her face that somehow made Ochako want to look at her. “But trust me, Ochako. If you move too fast, if you push through your pain and ignore it and skip steps, you’ll do far more damage than if you took your time.”

“Like an injury,” muttered Ochako.

“Exactly,” she said. “If you try and sprint too soon, you may not be able to walk in a few weeks. So trust me when I say I have your back. I want to see you flourish as a hero and a human.”

Ochako considered her wearily for a moment, her trust waxing and waning at frustrating speeds. But she had to pick her battles- she was already falling too far behind.

“Fine,” she muttered. “Fine. Whatever it takes to get me back to where I should be.”

“All right,” said Shoko with a nod. “Then, let’s talk about your homework this week.”

###

Her first day of training with Aizawa was fruitless, with her quirk remaining frozen in its original state, eliminating gravities pull on anything she touched but not managing to do anything else with it. However, some of that may have been due to how her focus was split between practice and actively smothering the embers of anger in belly begging her-absolutely begging her- to provoke a fight with her teacher.

A sensation she could not understand- it was another sensation that

felt like it truly did not belong to her. Her body, her mind, her emotions- all of them, along with her own fucking quirk, didn't feel like they belonged to her anymore.

She wanted to close her eyes and focus on the movement and radiation of her quirk, at his instruction, but she couldn't. She kept at least one eye open- keeping the quirk thief in her line of sight. She didn't speak a word to him except to acknowledge his instructions. She wanted to, but every time she almost convinced herself to let go of whatever it was in her body that was lashing out at the man- it caught in her chest, burning there in unbearable pain- begging to be spoken.

So, she opted, instead, not to speak at all. If her bone-weary teacher noticed, he didn't say anything. While he was not coddling her in the strictest definition- she assumed this was his version of that.

Not calling out her blatant disrespect.

Not telling her to dig deeper; to break herself so that she could repair and be stronger.

None of that from him.

Instead...

"We'll try again in a few days."

That was it.

She soon found herself sitting in the common area tables while Izuku and Shoto talked, while Tsu poured over her math homework, and while Momo and Iida made quiet conversation about class study sessions.

She observed each of them in turn as she fiddled with the peanut butter toast and sliced bananas in front of her. She watched them- her brain short-circuiting as it gasped under the pressure to mimic their energy.

She had energy inside of her- too much- but not whatever this energy was. Hers was buzzing and manic and overwhelming.

But this- this was like watching a movie through frosted glass- pathetic, sad, and frustrating. She looked at the other table where Mina was laughing with Jiro and Kaminari. She couldn't understand



it.

She should be able to do that.

She was alive.

Breathing. (Li wasn't).

She shook her head and took a few more hurried bites of her toast before standing.

"Ochako," said Tsu, a question in her voice. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she said; she looked down at her phone.

6:27.

"I'm going on a run."

Deku looked up from his conversation, eyes obviously going back down to her half-eaten toast, but before he can speak, Shoto does, his voice surprisingly calm and steady.

"Good idea, Uraraka," he said with a nod. "It's a nice evening. But make sure you're hydrated."

She smirked. "Will do."

She hurriedly gathered her plate and moved to the kitchen, throwing away the remainder of her toast and putting her plate in the washer before escaping to the stairs and from the curious gaze of her peers.

###

Katsuki had the benefit of being a stick in the mud, a benefit that allowed him to skip out, rush out, and ignore with ease. No one ever asked why he was heading out, except for Shitty Hair, on occasion.

So yeah, he followed her out- curious where she was going, wondering what possibly possessed her to go on a pre-sleep run. Something he had never known her to do. She had been blanking out all day- and just now, she had looked like a fucking zombie and then, suddenly, jumped up and left her friends in the common area.

He caught up with her fairly quickly as she entered into the wooded

path. He had noticed in their fight that she was getting faster.

That was good.

It had been her fatal flaw at the Sport's Festival- if she had been a little faster, she very well could have gotten the upper hand on him. He followed her for about 5 minutes before she finally acknowledged him.

"Can I help you," she asked.

"No," he said, speeding up to catch up with her.

"Then why are you here?"

He fell in beside her, hugging the opposite side of the path. "Tch..." he scoffed. "How do you know you aren't intruding on my run? You don't know my schedule." The truth that he was "curious" wasn't the answer he wanted to give. He did want to tell her that he thought it was bullshit that she couldn't be in the advanced combat classes. It seemed counter-productive to getting her caught up. So what if her quirk had malfunctioned- that was normal around here. It wasn't like they didn't all almost killed each other on the regular.

"Please," she said. "Aren't you usually tucked into bed with a cup of chamomile tea at this time?"

"Funny..."

Gradually he began to pick up his pace- just to see. She had surprised him on the mat, so maybe she would here too. She didn't look quite like a zombie. Sure, she looked pissed. But that was better than dead.

He looked over his shoulder as she picked up her pace too- much shorter legs extending far out to keep up. They continued this (Katsuki speeding up and Uraraka hastening to keep up) for a good while, until he was sure she wouldn't be able to take it any faster. She was sprinting at this point. He looked out the corner of his eyes.

She was drenched in sweat- her jaw clenched- and her body tense, focused. She stared (or glared) forward, almost unblinking. He took it up one more gear- eyes moving down to the movement of her legs- almost mechanical in their movements. He saw her reach deeper and saw the momentary shudder of pain, and then it was gone as she burst forward, chasing him down with everything inside of her.

He had seen her like this at the Sport's Festival too. But there was something that was just off about her. He didn't see grit and stubborn resolve, it was like she was jerking and stumbling forward; instead of knuckle under, come and get it, tenacity, she looked like she wanted to scream.

He was about to stop when suddenly, without warning, she pitched forward onto all fours and proceeded to vomit off the beaten path. Not that it mattered to him. He was sure many a UA student had voided their guts on this path, him included. He looked down at his watch- about 45 minutes at a fairly rigorous pace, but she was done. He was sure.

She pulled up on the collar of her shirt and whipped the bile from her mouth before turning, stumbling to her legs and fixing him with nothing short of a manic grin- eyes ablaze.

"Now that the warm-up is over..." she was getting faster- no doubt- and he knew many of his classmates would have easily been caught by her open hand strike, but he pivoted left and grabbed her wrist, holding her still.

He could tell from her expression that she was hopping mad- as if he had done something personally to offend her ancestors.

"Not worn out yet, Uraraka?"

She scoffed. "By you?" There was a bite in her voice that was still new. Granted, he had never seen her as a wilting flower, but he wasn't used to her voice sounding like that either. "Please!"

He was fairly certain he hadn't done anything to warrant the murderous gaze she was giving him. She twisted herself free, grabbing his hand in her turn, wrenching it painfully behind his back.

"This because I said you fought like you were afraid?"

He dodged a fist and then another, but he can't quite get out of reach of her kick. "No," she answered in a growl.

"Tch..." he swung out with one of his own kicks, but she bent backward just out of reach before it made contact with her chin before she reared toward him and threw herself forward. "Right, you're not mad at all."

Still a wrecking ball.

Still desperate.

Though this time with rage blazing unbidden in her eyes.

"I'm not," she screamed, accentuating it with a vicious right hook that he only just avoided.

"Sure about that?"

"Why the hell would I be mad at you," she growled through her bared teeth.

"Keep breathing," he ordered, landing a sharp kick to her shoulder. "And I don't know," he continued, answering her question. "I'm always pissing someone off."

"I'm..." lunge. "Not..." Punch. "PISSSED!"

He went down hard when her foot found his chest, but he grabbed her ankle on the way down, taking her with him. Their feet ground into the dirt, each one trying to stand only to be forced down by the other, a tangled mess of arms and limbs and hands, fighting for purchase and dominance.

"You're pissed," he returned, getting to his knees, his hands on her shoulder forcing her back down into the dirt. But her hands clasped his forearms and tried to jerk him back down toward her. He watched her face carefully as they grappled in the dirt, testing her reactions, looking for any sign of fear or panic. But there was nothing besides angry and cloudy and back again. It made no sense.

She was on her knees with him now, had managed to get up from under his weight. She should be going down. He was bigger, stronger, and outweighed her by...well...a lot more than he used to. But it was as if she was, by force of her own will, making her body keep moving, keep fighting, pressing into him with not enough force to make him go down but just enough to not go down herself.

"...Just not at me."

Finally, he knocked her shaking arms off of his shoulders and fell face-first into the ground. He rolled out of reach in case she leaped up, ready to attack again.

But she doesn't.

Instead, she pushed herself up, shakily, head bowed to the ground. He took a moment to wipe the dirt from his scraped forearms. She looked slightly worse for the wear but intact. Her fingers dug into the soil.

“Why...the fuck...did fucking Aizawa take me out of that class...”

His eyes widened for a second, and for a moment- one that he would take to his grave- he felt sad. It wasn't the cussing itself that did it- she had always found his vulgar language funny, more amusing than her nerdy friends, and there were plenty of contexts where he could imagine her swearing and still sounding like herself. But now- those particular obscenities seemed to be ripped from somewhere guttural inside of her.

“Yeah,” he said finally. “That was lousy.”

She rolled onto her back, her arms outstretched wide, palms to the sky, taking big, deep breathes.

“I just don't understand,” she said. “And they act like it's for me! Like I'm a delicate flower or something- like I need to be protected.” She stared up at the canopy of trees overhead, at the darkening sky peeking through the openings.

“It makes me feel like shit.”

She barely whispered the last part- like a confession- almost to herself. And Katsuki wondered for a moment if she had forgotten that he was here.

“And getting your ass kicked made you feel less shitty,” he asked.

“Yeah,” she answered numbly. “Actually, it does.”

He got it. It was maybe the most he had ever understood anything from her.

“Well,” he said, standing up and brushing the dirt from his pants. “Let me know when you want a rematch, Uraraka.”

He turned to walk back down the path they had run, back to the dorms, when he heard her shift behind him.

“Bakugo,” she called. He paused and looked over his shoulder. She was looking at him, almost appraising and suspicious. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why everything,” she asked. “Why follow me? Why fight me? Why?”

“Because you’re not boring to fight. I fucking fall asleep at the wheel with all the other extras. Sure, most of ‘em are stronger than you, but...” he shrugged again. “I like staying on my toes.”

She nodded, still seated in the dirt.

“Plus, it’s dumb,” he muttered. “I’ll beat you like I will everyone else, but it’s only fair you get an actual fair shot.”

He didn’t wait for her response but continued to walk.

“You saying you’ll train with me sometimes,” she called, almost hopeful.

“Tch...didn’t say that,” he called back.

“But will you?”

He paused. It was the first actual request he had seen her make since being here. Everything else had been forced smiles and hallow acquiescence. “You wanna get stronger and faster, I don’t mind you tagging along with me...” she snorted from where she still sat on the ground, but she didn’t object. “Besides,” he added. “I want first dibs on seeing your new quirk. It’ll give me an advantage in next year’s sport’s festival.”

This time she did laugh- an empty bark of a thing- not at all like her old laugh, so loud and obnoxious that it was impossible not to look her direction. He continued down his path. They had 30 minutes until curfew, and he was already past his bedtime.

She could find her own way back.

###

She couldn’t quite name why she felt a brief, fleeting moment of lightness when he talked about the Sport’s Festival.

She considered it for a moment.

It was the same tug of something when he gave her the binder- but no matter how she prodded, she couldn’t quite sort out what it made her feel. All she knew for sure is for a small moment, her chest didn’t feel

like it was caving in on itself, and she didn't feel like a stranger to herself.

Just a moment.

But she held to it like a life raft.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all the love and encouragement! This is a hard story for me to write and share but it's doing so much good for my soul.

# Who Saved You?

## Chapter Summary

Ochako snaps in more ways than one.

CW: Normal content warnings, and an additional one because Mineta behaves like a creep in this chapter and it's the last we see of him, because for my story, I need him gone because well...it's my story and I want all of her peers to love and support her like she deserves and that can't happen with Mineta!

## Chapter Notes

Hey Friends! Thank you for the continued support and love as I write this story :) It's been so much more encouraging than I ever thought it would be! :) This was actually a part of the last chapter but then it became 20,000 words. So instead I reworked a few things to make it another chapter that just came out sooner :) This was one of my favorites to write, so i hope you enjoy it!

Happy November! :)

Ochako had been at school for two weeks and was keenly aware by that second week that she was not in the driver's seat. But, oddly enough, she was okay with that- more than okay with it, actually. This was so much easier.

She felt a little like she was floating, and not the kind of floating that was almost second nature at this point. It was a different sensation- one that she should be more disturbed by. It had echoes of the sensation she was more than familiar with growing up, one she became reacquainted with during her first semester at UA when she had lived alone in her apartment.

It was the floaty, fuzzy feeling of hunger- so much more keen than she had ever felt it before.

Sometimes, she would go to bed and the only sign, the only evidence that she even lived a day that she had already forgotten, were the bruises left from sparring with Bakugo.

She was not in the driver's seat but was watching on the other side of



a bubble.

And that was for the best. It kept her safe. It kept her friend's safe.

In the bubble, she could focus on the ache in her muscles from her run, on subduing the hunger and nausea at war inside of her, the buzzing in her brain- all while whoever it was on the other side of the bubble- maybe her? She wasn't sure- smiled and nodded and engaged with her friends.

All the things she was afraid to do.

It was the best of all worlds.

She watched as Tsu and Mina chatted over their cards and as Izuku explained the rules of the game to Shoto again.

This was going great. Everything was going perfectly.

The bubble popped, suddenly, and so loud that it hurt. She moved without thinking, grabbing the wrist of the hand that had broken the bubble, the one on her shoulder, a strangled, panicked sob rising in her throat.

*"Wake up, sunshine..." a violent shake. "Time to go make daddy some money."*

She moved to twist the non-resisting hand as the light grip slackened on her shoulder. He used to drag her out of the cage like a dog. But this... this was different.

Iida didn't shove her away, despite the way she had leaped from her chair, and despite what she was sure was an uncomfortable twist of his wrist. He didn't fight back or resist or yelp. Rather he was looking at her with a calm understanding and a little bit of sadness.

"Oh god," she whispered, letting it go. "Iida, I'm...I'm so..." she could feel the eyes of the room on her.

Again.

Always.

And it was her own damn fault for being such a fucking spaz.

They were trying their best to treat her normal, and she went and did shit like this. She squeezed her eyes shut.

“I’m...”

“No,” he said hurriedly. “It was my fault. My apologies.”

Behind, she was sure Deku was standing up to check on her; she was sure Mina was nibbling nervously at her thumbnail; and when she looked up again, the guilt that he had done something wrong when he had not at all was written all over Iida’s face.

She should tell him that he hadn’t done anything wrong.

“I...I’m sorry, Iida,” she said, looking up at him in what she hoped was an assuring smile (though she doubted it was). “You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m just...I’m crazy tired.” She was. She always was. “I’m sorry, guys. I’m just going to go to bed, I think. So I’m not so snappy tomorrow.”

She didn’t wait for a response- she didn’t wait to find out why Iida had tried to get her attention in the first place. She would go bed- it wasn’t a total lie. She would go to her room and sleep, but only after floating everything that was not nailed to the ground. She would add onto it until her body began to shake until a sweat broke out on her forehead until a calming pain sank into her nerves when she managed to hold more, for longer.

She could figure this out.

If she mastered her quirk, her muscles, her bones- if she broke it all down, ground it into dust and rebuilt everything, she could be that new Ochako. The Ochako who could have saved Tsu and herself; saved herself and Li.

She held her dresser, her bed and her desk, every book, and coffee table, pushing herself right to the edge- and every time the edge got further away, when she felt like vomit was going to burn a hole in her throat, she quickly turned to her wastebasket and then started again.

The way her body shuddered and quaked, and the way her throat burned, calmed her guilty conscious a bit- taking her mind off of all of it.

Off of her last memory of Li.

Off of the look in that golden-haired boy’s eyes when he bled out beneath her.

Off of the hurt she had seen in Iida's eyes.

###

"Can you tell me how you felt today?"

The question came through like it was punching its way through wet cotton.

Muffled.

Both quiet and far too loud. She was supposed to be getting better.

She was supposed to be getting better.

*How did she feel?*

Not better.

Muffled. She felt muffled.

"Fine," she answered.

Shoko looked at her calmly, not judging, and not disappointed in her.

Fine.

It was all she had to give.

It was a lie- kind of.

And kind of not.

###

"The fuck are you doing, Uraraka?"

Uraraka stood up and grinned at Bakugo, wiping the blood from her chin and the debris from the explosion from her clothes.

"What? We said quirks were fine," she said.

“Yeah, but we’re sparring, idiot. You are supposed to avoid the explosion, not run into it.”

Ochako looked down at her bleeding, burned shin. “I tried,” she said (she lied). “Not fast enough, I guess.”

He snorted and widened his stance and gestured at her. “All right, come on,” he said. “This time, don’t run headfirst into the explosion, genius.”

She nodded, but she didn’t tell him that she liked it. She liked the sensation of being rocked, of her bones shaking in her skin, of being thrown back violently by the heat of his blast. She liked meeting a force that threw her off of her feet. She liked the shattering and the shaking when she rolled through the dirt, the way her skin burned.

She dodged most explosions this time- even getting a hand on him thanks to the shield provided by his debris. She let herself get hit a couple of more times. She knew it was weird, so she tried not to be too obvious about it.

Because she didn’t know how to explain to him why she sought it out- why she needed it. She didn’t tell him or her therapist because she didn’t know what it meant. She didn’t know what to do with the fact that she felt most like herself when she was being thrown to her feet, when she bounded off the ground and rolled gracelessly through dirt and gravel and grass. She didn’t know how to explain that her body felt safest- not when she was with her friends at dinner or in class- but when she was running blindly into one of his explosions.

She was supposed to be getting better.

So why was she still so sick?

###

“I trained with a boy from school...”

“Is that why your wrist is bandaged?”

Ochako nodded.

“I like training with him, though.”

Shoko’s eyes lift slightly at the admission, and the twitch of a smile

appeared on her lips. “Why?” she asked.

Ochako can’t tell her the truth- she knows that, of course. If she told her she liked it- like the pain and the heat and the blood, she would certainly tell her teachers, and they would never let her be a hero, let alone go back to all of her classes.

“He goes hard,” she answered, flexing her fingers. “He goes hard, and I need that.”

“Why do you need that?”

Ochako choked on her own saliva- an involuntary action, and she suddenly wanted to run.

Because...

She’s weak.

She’s slow.

She couldn’t do anything.

She failed.

She killed.

“Don’t know,” she answered.

Surprisingly, Dr. Shoko looked happy enough with that answer.

###

“Concentrate, take note of where your quirk is...”

*Shut up.*

“Where it is in your hands...”

*Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.*

“In your arms.”

Yes- hands, arms, legs- the hand bones connected to the fucking wrist bone. Now shut the fuck up. Every part of her was on edge; she had finally forced herself to keep her eyes closed. As long as the sneaky

mother fucker didn't try and take her quirk, then she was fine and dandy.

"You have a connection to gravity," he said. "You can manipulate one of the most important forces on the planet."

She wondered when he started talking like he was Yoda. He should be sighing exhaustedly, telling her that this barely scraping by wasn't going to cut it- tell her to dig deep and try harder.

"Now, try it."

She sighed and brought her fingers together, holding them instead of releasing. It was the only thing she did to bring the ceiling down back at the warehouse. She dug her fingers tips together, willing the floating rocks above her to fall, to shatter, to sink into the ground.

She sat there- teeth gritted, and finger pads pressed together- for five minutes. Then another five. And another five.

"Your nausea is getting better," Aizawa remarked. She released with a frustrated growl and let the rocks around her fall, and she opened her eyes. Aizawa stood a few yards away from her.

"Tired," he asked.

"No," she said, voice clipped and cold. "Just hard to concentrate."

Aizawa had gotten used to her cold tone at this point. While she had yet to cross the line into blatant disrespect, she did toe that line in their lessons together- it was hard not to, when she found everything about him particularly grating.

Some part of it was her testing the waters- wanting to get a rise out of him, wanting him to reprimand her and raise his voice, to treat her like a normal student. But some part of her knew that wasn't the whole reason, and that reason was like a splinter in her brain that she couldn't quite find. She could feel the infection it was causing, but she couldn't find the cause.

"Are you eating enough, Uraraka?"

She scowled up at him from where she sat on the ground.

"Yes," she snapped. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Your quirk is like a muscle," he said. "It's a part of your body, and it

requires energy to use- and if you don't have..."

"I'm passing bio just fine," she snapped. "And yes, I'm eating enough. Thanks so much for your concern."

He sighed wearily, and a spark of excitement leaped in her chest at the reaction. "I'm trying, Uraraka," he said. "But if you want a new teacher, then I can arrange..."

She froze, something in her chest tightening with panic. And before she could stop it, before she could control it, a sob escaped her throat as she scrambled to her feet. "Wh...what...why would you say that?" she asked, her voice trembling with betrayal. "Do you...do you not want to be my teacher anymore?"

She hated herself- hated herself for how pathetic she sounded, for how desperate the question fell from her lips. It was no wonder he didn't know what she wanted from him. She didn't know what she wanted from him either. She had gone from angry bitch to needy child in a moment.

What was wrong with her?

She was alive.

Li wasn't.

She kept fucking up.

Her breathing rattled in her chest, and her blood was pumping like a raging river.

"Uraraka," he said carefully. "I want to teach you, but..."

"But what," she gasped out, breathless and dizzy with panic. "I'm doing my best."

She had to do her best.

But her best wasn't good enough.

To save her.

To save Li.

To save anyone.

“Uraraka,” she could feel him moving closer, but she took a stumbling step backward as she scrambled for breath. She looked up at him and saw something familiar in the way he was reaching out toward her, in the way he was moving toward her like she was a cornered animal who might bolt at any point, something she pulled from her medicine-fogged memory.

In a hospital room.

She had felt this way then.

And he had been there.

She inched closer to the feeling.

*“You’re running before you have to feel it,” Dr. Shoko had told her. “It’s why when I ask you how you felt today, you couldn’t really say.”*

She asked her every week, and Ochako could never answer. She would shrug and say “fine,” both of them knowing that it wasn’t true.

*“But you can’t selectively numb yourself, Uraraka. You run from every scary and unpleasant emotion; you also run from the good.”*

She tried to poke curiously at the feeling in front of her. But she was so tired.

And whatever it was, it was shrouded with darkness- a cold, sucking darkness; tendrils that grasped and reached. And she couldn’t get caught in them. She was terrified of what would happen if she did.

“Uraraka...”

She retreated to the only place she knew.

“I can do it,” she growled, venom dripping from her teeth.

“Uraraka,” he continued calmly. “You can take a break. You don’t look...”

“I said I can fucking do it!”

Her scream echoed around the clearing.

And some archaic part of her brain, something that screamed at her that she would die if she didn’t get this right, that she would die if she stayed as weak as she was, switched on. She didn’t notice what it was



doing until her eyes flew open, and she caught sight of not just the rocks, but the dirt, the leaves, the discarded debris, and her sleepy teacher, floating off the ground around her.

Things she hadn't touched.

"Fuck..."

She steepled her fingers and released, sending everything back to the ground.

"Sensei," she said, falling to her knees shakily as the man stood and brushed off his pants. "Are you okay?!" The question was ragged and broken.

"Fine," he said, curiously looking around at everything that had been caught in her pull. "Is that new?"

"Uh..." she rubbed the back of her neck. "Uh...no..." she said. "I don't know. I did something to Bakugo in class without actually getting my hands on him. So maybe it's something similar?"

He nodded. "Okay," he mused. "We'll have to keep track of the ways it changes and what causes the changes as we attempt to replicate them." She nodded and felt tears gathering in the corner of her eyes, and she had no idea why. "It seems like your quirk goes into overdrive in moments of hyperarousal. Is that accurate?"

She shrugged, feeling empty and hallowed out.

"Just now, you were quite angry with me."

That wasn't it.

"I'm angry all the time," she choked out, looking down at the dirt. She waited for him to speak, to indicate that he had heard her. "So that's not it..."

"Right," he said, voice low. "Right, well...whatever it was, is it similar to what you felt in your fight with Bakugo?"

Yes.

But she hated the feeling, *that* feeling. And it was always under her skin- every moment of every day- like a poison she couldn't bleed out- simultaneously numbing and leaving her raw and exposed.

"I'm...I'm tired, Sensei," she murmured.

She was tired all the time.

Tired of fighting.

Tired of trying.

Tired of failing.

She was tired in her bones and body.

"Can I go now?"

She was already moving before he answered the question.

"All right," he said. "I'll see you next Thursday, then."

She nodded, gathering her stuff up and walking past him to the next thing.

The next goddamn thing.

###

Katsuki watched her from the corner of his eyes as he finished cleaning his dishes. He wasn't sure how she was simultaneously getting stronger and collapsing in on herself all at once. She was sitting with most of the class- joining them for movie night. He could see the bandage on her shoulder from their spar that morning.

She was going harder, faster, and for longer than she looked like she should physically be able to. It had been admirable in the first week of them training together- fascinating in the second week- and now it was disturbing. He was a firm believer that refusing to let up, of pushing beyond pain and weakness, was the surest sign of strength. But her body- her physical-body was breaking, and the repair that was supposed to make her stronger wasn't happening.

It wasn't grit-it was something else, something he wasn't familiar with and didn't know how to identify. It was almost like she couldn't even feel the pain- or else had forgotten how to react to it. And he knew that was fucking dangerous. He used to ignore pain.

His explosions would rip open his hands, and he would ignore it; he would keep going no matter how jacked his shoulders were, with broken elbows and forearms that were actively tearing apart. He

would keep going because he thought it made him stronger.

It hadn't.

It had nearly cost him his future as a hero.

So he had to learn control.

It was a fine line. But pushing through pain was not the same as disregarding it entirely.

"Hey Bakugo, I think that cup is clean..."

He snarled at Pikachu as he rooted through the cabinets, pulling out a box of popcorn from the cabinet.

"Mind your own damn business, Shit-for-Brains...like you know what clean is." Katsuki turned off the water and laid the thoroughly rinsed cup on the drying rack before chancing another look over at Uraraka. She sat in one of the big chairs by the sofa, almost disappearing into it; eyes glazed and tired, their perpetual state if there weren't flames of rage flicking inside of them.

Her knees were bent, and she was holding them to her chest, resting her chin there, shivering like crazy. When the rest of the class exploded in laughter at a scene, she would jump slightly, hackles raised, and ready to lash out.

Fuck, wasn't she supposed to be getting help?

Wasn't she supposed to be getting better?

She had been at UA a month now, and if anything, she seemed worse. And lately, he had found himself falling into a certain kind of anger. Sure, he was angry all the time, but this was a different kind. One he felt when he saw her slumped exhaustedly in her desk, her eyes drooping but never quite closing, when he saw her scrape most of her attempted meals into the trash, or when the table she was at erupted into laughter, something that would usually make her laugh too, only to find her vacant and lost.

This was not generalized anger- but rather pointed and murderous as he found himself personally- fucking- affronted at whatever it was that had happened to her to so drastically change her. He wasn't a big fan of change as is. He got used to things going a certain way, abiding by certain rules and expectations that he could navigate. Granted, he had

never quite managed to get the upper hand on Uraraka that he was used to having on people, but still, he had come to expect a certain way of being from her.

Did it irritate him sometimes? Sure.

Was her laugh loud and obnoxious? Yes.

Was her blatant disrespect at his gaze of fury annoying as hell? Absolutely.

But he had grown used to all those things. They were normal, and now she was like that this, and it made it him so angry sometimes he couldn't see straight.

He had never dwelled on the specifics of what had happened to her like some of his peers because he maintained- despite whatever their new relationship was- that it was none of his business (and that was the only business he minded).

But he knew she was fucking strong- knew she deserved to be here- and that some fucking bullies did something to so drastically change her- just because they could- it made him see red when he thought about it.

He stomped suddenly over to her, his feet carrying him without his say-so, his hands unzipping his hoodie. Her chair was thankfully situated slightly away from the group, angled toward the T.V. He dropped his hoodie wordlessly on the arm of her chair.

And then, immediately, started to swear at himself.

That was *his* jacket.

Not hers.

But it was too late; her head had turned toward him.

*Why the fuck had he done that?*

*Stop making decisions when you're angry* ; he scolded himself. Now she had his jacket, and god only knew when he would get that back. She blinked up at him wordlessly, almost like she didn't recognize him for a moment.

God, she looked fucking terrible.

She reached shakily for the hoodie. Before he could say anything else, before that same weird feeling stirred up in him that made him want to give her his hoodie in the first place because she was always fucking shaking like she was in a fucking tundra, he turned and walked away. He didn't look back until he was at the stairs and just to check to make sure she wasn't just gawking at the hoodie like an idiot. But it was already hanging off of her like a tent, pulled over her knees to cover her legs.

He balked at that abuse but remembered how much smaller she was now- it seemed unlikely that even wearing it like that, she would stretch it out.

By the time he got to his room, his phone had dinged in his pocket.

**Uraraka: Thanks.**

He typed out a quick response.

**Whatever. Go to bed. You look like shit.**

He didn't know if he expected or only just hoped that he would get a snarky response in return. And he hated himself as he compulsively checked and rechecked his phone.

He didn't mean anything by it. He had said much worse than that to her before, and it didn't scare her away. He went about his nighttime routine, listening the whole time for his phone. But it didn't go off again.

This was stupid.

There was no reason he should be thinking about it. She knew him- as much as anyone else did- she knew the way he spoke. She had laughed at it more than once.

His phone beeped again, and he hurriedly brought it to his face in the dark.

**Shitty Hair: Why is Uraraka wearing your hoodie?**

**Katsuki: Probably so she doesn't freeze to death. And mind your fucking business.**

**Shitty Hair; Don't be like that. It's hella manly, bro.**

**Katsuki: I'm sleeping. Leave me alone.**

He silenced his phone and put it back on the table by his bed and attempted to stop replaying the footage in his head of her throwing herself over and over again toward his explosions, like a soldier throwing herself on a grenade- something just a little off in her eyes when she did it.

It was none of his business.

They weren't friends.

They were occasional sparring partners and peers.

They weren't friends.

###

"I don't think about it..."

"About what, Ochako?"

"I said I don't think about it..." she repeated to Shoko. "I'm not haunted. I don't think about it. I haven't had a nightmare since being at UA. So why am I here?"

Dr. Shoko leaned forward.

"Is that true, Ochako?"

"Yes," she snapped. "I don't think about it, ever."

"And you think that's a good thing," the woman pressed gently.

"Of course it is," Ochako snapped. "That's the goal, right? To move on. To get better?" Her body was shaking, vibrating as adrenaline flooded her system. She felt exhaustedly aware of everything and nothing.

"No," said Dr. Shoko calmly. "It's not the goal. The goal is integration. It's looking at all of the pieces and putting them back together to finish the picture."

She growled and rolled her eyes. "Well, these aren't pieces," she snapped. "They don't fit together, they don't match...they don't...work." She sighed and let her head fall back. "Nothing works."

Dr. Shoko looked at her, waiting for her to say more.

Fuck her.

“There is no way I can integrate these pieces,” Ochako continued.  
“Without messing everything up. They are doing enough damage as is.”

“Is it working?” asked Dr. Shoko. “Trying to cut the pieces out.”

“Maybe if you helped,” Ochako barked. “Maybe if you gave me something useful, I could actually move on and get over this.”

“Over what?”

Ochako gripped her hair at the roots and tugged hard. “This,” she screamed out. “Me! This! All of it. I just want to...” she stuttered to a stop, tripping over the end of the sentence.

“Want what?”

Want.

She reached out for a *want* ; a solid want, but it was hidden there in the dark, in the cold, in the suffocating stillness of herself.

“I don’t...I want to not...”

It’s all she can manage, and, as always, Dr. Shoko doesn’t press for more.

“New hoodie?” she asked suddenly.

Ochako looked down at the sweater, sleeves shoved up to her elbows so that they didn’t fall over her hands. “Uh no,” she said. “It’s Bakugo’s.”

Dr. Shoko nodded. “The one you train with?”

She nodded.

“You enjoy training with him?”

She buckled at the word. *Enjoy* ?

That wasn’t the word she would use.

She had to train with him because she had been kicked out of her class. She had to train with him because she needed to.

But enjoy?

Now that she thought about it, she wasn't sure what she enjoyed anymore. But surely she enjoyed something.

Mochi?

A warm shower?

A song?

She couldn't remember. The past few months of freedom had gone by in a vague haze.

Was she so devastated to her core that she couldn't even enjoy anything anymore?

"No," she answered. "I have to train with him."

"Why?"

"Because I'm..." it was on the tip of her tongue.

I'm...

I'm...

Some positive affirmation- a claiming. But it doesn't come. Because she doesn't know anything anymore.

Except that she's weak.

Except that she had let Li die.

"I need to get stronger."

"Is that why you're wearing his hoodie?"

"The fuck does that have to do with anything?" she snapped defensively.

"Maybe nothing," she said. "But...something to consider."

Ochako rolled her eyes. "Why are you so vague about everything all the time."



Dr. Shoko laughed and shrugged. "Because you're a very smart girl, Ochako. And I think you know the answer to most of the questions that you have."

"Then why the hell am I here?!"

"Ochako," said Dr. Shoko, leaning forward. "I just said you know the answers, so I think you know the answer to that question too."

Ochako didn't know what the hell she was talking about. She didn't know anything. She couldn't even say what she wanted. She sure as hell didn't know what she needed. She didn't know why she couldn't laugh or smile or breathe or be with her friends like the teenager she was.

Why couldn't she just...

Stop.

Make it all stop.

She was just so tired.

###

Ochako wanted to scream. She wanted to scream all the time lately. She wanted to scream, claw, scratch, and kick- anything to get this feeling out of her. Anything to escape the hellish in between that she lived in, the infuriating feeling of being only partially connected to her own body.

Her fucking body- weak and outside of her control- so far gone that she had to ruthlessly grind it down. Because it betrayed her every damn moment, every hair, every nerve, every cell wouldn't shut up. All of them stood on a narrow ledge.

A ledge that made it impossible to let down her guard because on one side of that edge was nothing, a horrifying gaping maw of nothing. On the other was an ocean of razors, cutting into her whole being.

So she walked the ledge.

And she was trying so fucking hard. But Deku was looking at her plate

as they all sat together in the cafeteria at lunch. She took another bite to quell his fears, choking back the ramen.

"I think we should study tonight for the English exam," said Iida.

She nodded, trying to focus on anything other than the way her body wouldn't stop shaking, trying to expel something from her.

"Yeah," said Deku with an enthusiastic nod. "Then, we can look at our ethics notes. I think the exam will include a lot of court dates and short answers."

She gripped tightly to the loose fabric of her hands, trying to keep them from trembling.

Why did she feel like this? All the time. She was safe. She was safe here- and yet she felt like she was going to die at every moment, like one misstep, one missed moment, would cost her life.

Why did she want to run?

Why was her heart racing?

Why?

Her body had needed a reason to snap- to jump into action, begging for a threat to fight- anything to get this poison wrecking her body out of her. And in a rare moment of luck and fate intersecting, the opportunity presented itself, from the corner of her eyes.

Mineta was trailing behind a girl, some first year, with his phone out and attempting to snap a picture under her skirt.

Those fucking skirts.

That damned skirt.

Her blood ran cold.

Her fists hit the table as she stood. Deku jumped slightly, and Iida let out a shocked gasp of indignation as her chair clattered back.

"Uraraka," said Tsu, reaching a hand up, but she jerked away, more violently than necessary, but she didn't pause to see the look of hurt on her friend's face. Instead, she whipped around and crossed the yards separating her from Mineta.

“Uraraka!” called Deku, desperately trying to calm her, but her eyes were locked in on Mineta, who was still tailing the leggy girl, grinning lecherously as he angled his phone for another shot up her skirt.

“Mineta,” she barked. It would be more satisfying to see his face when she knocked him on his ass. He looked up from his phone, and the girl turned and let out a shocked sound when she saw Mineta standing so close to her. Uraraka could see the blush and the unmistakable flicker of embarrassment as she scurried away, tugging lightly at her skirt.

“Oh, Uraraka,” he crooned. “My love, no need to be jealous. I can have eyes for more than just one set of lovely...”

An eruption of howls, surprised whoops, and the screeching of chairs as they were pushed back only just drowned out the sound of her fist connecting hard with his jaw.

Just a punch.

Deku and Bakugo nearly killed each other on the regular.

She’d take the detention gladly.

Mineta had fallen back on the ground, eyes wide with shock. “What the hell?” he gasped, holding his cheek.

“Uraraka! Don’t!”

She ignored Iida as she went to her knees, glowering over the imp. She grabbed him by the collar and jerked him up.

“Give me your phone,” she demanded. Mineta raised a trembling chin as if he were taking a stand or something.

“Why don’t you reach into my pocket and get it?” he said, a slimy leer in his voice.

“You piece of shit...” her fist almost made contact a second time; two punches- two punches were okay- and, god, she needed them bad. She wouldn’t be expelled for two. But when she moved to land her second blow, she found her hand frozen above her, held in place by a vice grip around her wrist. She turned to see Deku standing over her, looking desperately sad and confused as if he didn’t recognize her right now.

A sob turned into a snarl in her throat as she jerked away. Of course,

he didn't recognize her- she was empty now- empty of herself and everything else.

She didn't recognize herself.

So why would he?

But also, she wasn't wrong.

She jerked her hand away- knowing he would let go. He did.

"Uraraka, don't..."

She turned to Mineta.

"Give me your fucking phone," she growled. "Or I will send your ass flying."

Mineta looked at her for a moment, and he must have seen what she was feeling- that she could murder him right here and now- and his face was awash with fear. Good. She preferred that to how he usually looked at her.

He reached trembling into his pocket and handed his phone to her. She swiped it before shoving him back hard onto the floor. When she stood, she saw the crowd that had gathered- some excited, some disappointed, and some, mainly those who knew her, looked afraid.

And she nearly saw red once again.

Because sure- she had snapped, but no one looked at Mineta that way- with the same disbelief they were looking at her with. Not a damn one of them. They looked at him annoyed, placating, irritated, and, sure, no one cheered him on, but they treated him like an annoying fly- no one looked at him like they were looking at her now.

Like she was the problem.

So- yea...fuck all of them too. She marched over to Iida, who seemed to be torn between a reprimand and his concern.

"Here," she said, holding the phone out to Iida. "Make sure Aizawa gets this and make sure he knows that Mineta was taking pictures up girls skirts." She dropped it into his outstretched hands. She should stop there. These were her friends. But she was mad. She looked up at him, finding the disappointment there. "Be a class rep and tell Aizawa

that Mineta isn't a hero."

All he did was nod.

Ochako didn't linger to see who else was looking. She shoved past her friends toward the exit, past murmured questions, and a few calls of concern, but she ignored them. She made it outside, into the fresh air, and around the building, so she was not directly by the entrance. When she was safely out of sight.

She got sick...again.

She had it memorized by now- the sensation that trembled through her- the way her throat burned and the acidic bite on her tongue. But it was still painful.

One of the only things that *was* without fail.

When she was done, she slumped back against the brick and held her legs to her; still shaking, still on edge; still fighting an opponent who wasn't there. Mineta had been there, but now who could she punch, who could she lash out at.

"Here."

She jumped at the sound of an unfamiliar voice coming from above her. She blinked furiously to rid herself of her haze- until the face came into focus.

"Shinso," she said, her voice raspy from sickness. He shook the bottle of water at her by way of answer.

She took it, quickly using the water first to wash out her mouth before spitting it into the dirt beside her. He sighed and leaned against the brick wall, hands shoved in his pockets as he looked up at the sky.

"Thank you," she said, finally, taking another small sip. His gaze remained upward, eyes deep-set, and weary.

"Can't believe it took so long for someone to kick his ass publicly."

She snorted. "Plenty of the 2-A girls have knocked him around," she said. "This was my first time, though."

He sighed. "Can't believe that piece of shit made it into the hero course."

She closed her eyes and stretched her legs out in front of her. It was weird- why should she feel more relaxed now? Shinso was a stranger- she never spoke to him, and yet his modest affirmation had served to soften the pain she had seen in Deku's eyes, the disappointment in Iida's, the fear in Tsu's. They loved her. They loved her so much, so why couldn't she just- let them.

Shinso, for some reason, remained beside her- for some reason, he didn't leave- for some reason, she was okay with that. He let out another labored sigh and racked his hand through his rowdy purple hair.

"I'm sorry," he said- finally. And somehow, maybe because he doesn't know her, because he doesn't really care about her or love her- the words seem neutral and honest, without expectation. She looked up at him from her seated position; he inclined his head slightly but still stared forward. "I'm sorry that something bad happened to you."

It was maybe the third or fourth time since returning that she felt actual tears prickle behind her eyes. She wasn't sure why his words fell so hard on her, but they did. There was no guilt in them. No obligation, just an honest, unguarded expression, and she felt her chest open just a bit from the crushing sensation.

"Thank you, Shinso," she said, small and quiet and exhausted. She let her eyes shut for a moment, resting in the quiet of the moment before she looked back up at him. "You'll make a good hero one day, Shinso."

He didn't respond, but she could see the slight upturn at the corner of his mouth before she turned her own gaze back to the warming rays of the sun.

###

She wasn't in class for the rest of the day. Katsuki had missed the altercation himself, but by the time class had ended that day, he had heard about five different versions of what had happened.

Everything from Uraraka straight-up murdered Grape-Rape (good) to attacked him unprovoked because (clearly) she had gone crazy- a retelling that he had interrupted with a threatening snarl at the two

third-years in the locker room. It wasn't until he got back to the dorms that he overheard her idiot friends talking about it and got what he assumed was a fairly accurate picture of what had happened.

"Dude," said Pinky, sliding next to them on the couch. "Did Uraraka really kick Mineta's ass?"

"No," said Deku hurriedly, overlapping with Icy-Hot's "yes."

"I mean," Deku stumbled nervously over his words. "She just punched him, that's it."

Katsuki scoffed from the kitchen. She had punched him? That was it? Why was everyone's panties in a twist then? People punched each other in this place all the time- why should Deku be so scandalized by it? The idiot took him up on an after-hours brawl their first year.

Why would he grudge Uraraka- or any girl for that matter- the chance to deck Mineta?

*"I'm not sure how you could aim such a powerful blast at a frail girl."*

That's right.

It was okay for Deku, for himself, for Four-Eyes to get in a fight because they could handle it- they weren't frail.

He scoffed and approached the little gossips all gathered in the living room. "What did the little fuck do?"

Deku looked up, surprised. "Oh, hey, Kacchan! I didn't know you were..."

"Yeah...yeah...what the fuck did he do to make Uraraka go off?"

"Well, uh..."

"He was just being Mineta," volunteered Pikachu.

Katsuki scoffed. "Good enough reason as any."

"He was trying to uh..." Deku blushed and rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "Take pictures up a..." he mumbled the last bit awkwardly.

"What was that Midoriya?" asked Pinky.

“He was attempting to take pictures up the skirt of a fellow student,” offered Icy-hot, looking down at his bowl of noodles. He hated the guy sometimes, but even Katsuki had to admit that his lack of social graces had a way of cutting through the bullshit.

“So sounds like he got off lucky with just a punch,” said Katsuki. “That fucker needs a shrink and shock collar, not a hero license.”

“Preach,” said Pinky.

“What are we preaching?” asked Shitty Hair, strolling over and flopping down beside Pinky with a plate of microwaved nuggets...  
ugh, *animal*.

“That Mineta deserved to be decked.”

“Oh come on, guys,” said Pikachu with a sheepish shrug. “Mineta was acting like he always does.”

“Yeah,” said Pinky, an annoyed bite in her voice. “That’s the problem.”

“But shouldn’t...it’s not really fair to punish him for behavior that we’ve all ignored for a year.”

“Maybe you’ve ignored,” said Frog-Face. “I’ve smacked him around for groping my boobs.”

Deku’s blush deepened, and Pikachu’s eyes widened. “Yeah,” affirmed Pinky, clearly annoyed and bordering on angry from the way Shitty Hair was attempting to rub soothing circles into her back. “Just because you all can’t manage more than an occasional slap on the wrist doesn’t mean the girls haven’t been kicking the little creep off of our legs from day one.”

Katsuki froze for a moment. He knew Mineta was a perky creep, but he regularly touched the girls, and no one had done anything about it? At a school for heroes? Something about that didn’t add up?

“But it’s harmless, right?” asked Pikachu. “He’s not actually gonna hurt anyone?”

“Dude,” said Shitty Hair. “Imagine someone constantly making you feel like shit, imagine someone grabbing your dick or your ass because they can, and then someone saying that it doesn’t matter because they didn’t rip it off.”



Pikachu shuddered at the thought.

“Or they tell you it’s a compliment,” huffed Pinky.

*Really*, Katsuki thought. *People say that?*

“Why don’t you just punch him?” asked Pikachu.

“That’s exactly what Uraraka did,” said Kirishima, his own frustration hedging into his tone.

“And then we get accused of overreacting,” said Pinky.

“Or of being a bitch,” muttered Katsuki, remembering what those two fuckers had said in the locker room.

“Yeah.” Pinky nodded and crossed her arms over her chest. “And it feels like crap when your teachers are telling you that he can be a hero when he has just finished slapping you on the ass.”

Katsuki’s face twisted in disgust at that thought.

“Okay,” said Pikachu, nodding as he took in their words. Katsuki knew he was an idiot sometimes, but he wasn’t cruel or uncaring in the way the Purple Prune was. “So...why don’t you just tell someone?”

“Because...” they turned over the sofa to where Ponytail was sitting at the table, daintily sipping her tea. “We are heroes,” she said, her voice calm. “We are supposed to be strong and confident and competent, and it’s embarrassing to talk about, especially when every message from your school is that Mineta’s behavior is acceptable.”

Pinky nodded.

And none of these girls were his friends- they weren’t. But, he was supposed to be a hero. They were all supposed to be heroes, and they just turned a blind eye because it was convenient.

“Look,” said Deku, finally speaking up. “I don’t give a shit about Mineta.” If people weren’t listening before, the brutal way the words flew from Deku’s lips had them listening now. Katsuki supposed he had the privilege of being deeply intimate with Deku in his most feral state. “I don’t even care that Uraraka punched him. If she had dragged him out into the middle of the school grounds and kicked his teeth in because he crossed a line, then I would be right with her in Nezu’s

office, making a case for why she shouldn't be expelled. It was the way she looked when she did it. She..." he sighed, his angry expression giving way to sadness. "She looked like she wanted to hurt him. Like she could have killed him. Like it wasn't even her in control. It's everything. She's not herself. She's not sleeping, she's not eating, and I can't even remember the last time that she laughed." Deku looked truly and completely devastated. "I don't care that she punched Mineta in the face. I would have been relieved to see her do it if she had looked anything like herself when it happened."

"Speaking of Uraraka," said Shitty Hair. "Has anyone checked in on her since it happened?"

"I'm sure she just wants to be alone," said Icy Hot, his sentence punctuated by the violent sound of crashing, of the small coffee table flying and splintering in a flash of green rage. Everyone leaped back except for Katsuki and Icy-Hot as Deku stood, trembling with rage.

"How long are we supposed to leave her alone?" he growled, his scarred hands forming tight fists. "How long are we supposed to just watch? Because I'm not convinced that we aren't watching her actively kill herself in front of us, and I can't..." the anger, as it often was with Deku, was chased away by tears, by aching grief.

Katsuki was sure people were moving to comfort him, to assure him that everything would be okay. And even though Katsuki was a bit confused about his own feelings when it came to all this shit- there would be a blizzard in hell before he cuddled up next to Deku for no reason.

Instead, he left the dorm, stepping out into the chilly night air, and headed toward Ground Beta. He knew she liked to go there to work on her quirk development, and it seemed like Aizawa was as scared of her as anyone, so she took whatever fucking liberties she damned well pleased.

He walked the fake streets, his eyes searching the alleys, the side roads, and the tops of the buildings. He looked for anything floating above the skyline, always a honing beacon for Uraraka's location. But instead, he caught sight of something that made his heart stop and seize with panic for one excruciatingly long moment. She was falling- fucking nose-diving from the top of a skyscraper.

He only hesitated for a moment before he was propelling himself forward as fast as he could- as hard as he could- his blood running

cold and ears echoing with Deku's words.

*"I'm not convinced that we aren't watching her actively kill herself in front of us."*

She was falling so fast- faster than he was moving, and she was still so far away.

Fuck. This was why she should have been hanging out around her stupid friends and not him. If she was fucking suicidal, he had no idea.

Sad? Sure.

Angry? Fuck yes.

Off? Obviously.

But suicidal? He had no idea. And she was seconds away from success because it was becoming clearer and clearer that he was not going to reach her.

He wasn't going to be able to save her.

She was yards away from the hard ground, and soon, he would be scooping her brains off the pavement, and for some reason- for some God-forsaken reason- he has never been so fucking scared in his life that he was going to fail.

And then, suddenly, a whole fucking foot off the ground. She came to an abrupt stop and started floating. She pinwheeled down and pushed off the ground with her legs, sending herself shooting back up into the air.

Katsuki sputtered to a stop a few yards away from her- his heart hammering in his chest, his whole body vibrating with adrenaline.

"What the fucking fuck," he screamed, releasing the swirling mix of tension, worry, and panic into the air. Above him, Ochako looked down, clearly confused, and surprised to see him there. She began to let herself fall- surprising him with the steady fall back down. She used to be so ungraceful in the air, curled up in a round ball, fighting to hold back her vomit. Now it looked like she was falling on purpose. He took a moment to be impressed before he remembered how pissed off he was. He stomped over to her as she touched down and released.

“What the fuck, Uraraka?”

“Right,” she said, “Cool, huh?”

“Cool?! Cool? No, Uraraka, not fucking cool!”

“Why are you yelling at me?” she asked, her eyes flashing with annoyance.

“Because...”

He stepped closer, ready to yell more, to tell her why he was yelling. But then he faltered.

Why was he yelling?

Because she had been stupid?

Because she jumped off a fucking building?

Because her quirk was unstable right now, and that seemed like an irresponsible way to test it- especially by herself?

Because...

Because he still felt the embers of fear smoldering in his chest- and it was her fucking fault.

Bitch...

“Because that was fucking stupid!”

She rolled her eyes. “Says the guy who lugs around gauntlets so big that they break his shoulders.”

“That’s not...”

“Or the guy who dips his hands into boiling water...”

“Okay,” he said, running his hands through his hair, trying to get his heart rate under control, trying to find some non-lame way to tell her he had thought she was about to off herself, and he couldn’t get that thought out of his head.

“Or the guys who wanted to square up with All-Might!”

He let out a frustrated growl.

She wasn't wrong.

But she was. It was different for her- not because she was a girl, not because she was Uraraka- but because Deku was right.

She wasn't okay.

If all that shit had not happened to her, he would have assumed that she was training, getting stronger, and better in that way he had come to expect from her. But all that shit did happen, and she didn't smile anymore, and she didn't laugh anymore, and she had been plummeting toward the ground without a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes.

Like she wouldn't have cared if her quirk did malfunction.

So it was different.

"I'm just saying," he continued through gritted teeth. "Don't fucking play like that without a safety net or at least someone to spot you."

"Whatever," she said, rolling her eyes and turning to walk away from him. "Oi! Don't fucking 'whatever' me, Uraraka. This isn't a fucking game." He grabbed her arm, without thinking, acting on his own out of control emotions of frustration and confusion, but so was she. She spun around and grabbed his wrist, painfully wrenching it away from her wrist.

"Don't fucking touch me," she yelled, shoving him away from her. She stumbled away from him and whipped her gaze upward before throwing a punch at him, that he dodged. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

"With me," he spat. "Nothing, but there sure as fuck is something wrong with you."

He dodged and weaved and backed away from her as she advanced on him, swinging and kicking hard and fast and ferocious.

"Come on, Kacchan," she snarled. He didn't want to fight her, not now. But another one of her punches clipped his jaw, and suddenly, he was feeling a lot less gracious. "I thought you didn't go easy on anyone."

"You're fucking delusional if you think I haven't been going easy on you," he taunted back.

She let out a cry, something painful and animalistic that froze him long enough for her to get a hand on him, activating her quirk.

“Then fucking stop,” she screamed and flung him into the air.

“Fucking hell,” he growled as he pinwheeled gracelessly into the air, his feet up in the air and his head down as he released an explosion sending him careening back toward her like a missile, slamming into her so hard that he worried for a minute that he actually broke her bones, but he held tight to her, keeping himself rooted to the ground with her weight.

“Fucking turn this shit off, Uraraka,” he demanded, straddling her and pinning her to the ground.

“Make me,” she spat, like some kind of child, before head butting him so hard he saw stars for a moment, and that was all she needed to kick him off of her. He quickly adjusted to the Zero-G and sent himself exploding toward her again.

His own anger was rising to meet hers, and she looked fucking thrilled about it. Like it was what she wanted from him all along. She jumped up to meet him in the air, her own gravity eliminated, and he swore to God that she just let him collide with her with little resistance as they spun out of control through the air.

“Don’t hold back, Katsuki,” she yelled over the wind rushing past them, and it was an odd moment- he thought- for her to use his given name for the first time. “Fight me as hard as you would anyone else.”

“Keep pushing me, Uraraka, and you’ll get exactly what you want...”

She kicked off his chest and away from him before releasing her quirk. Katsuki used his explosions to control his fall, but Ochako slammed into the concrete before rolling up into a fighting stance. He landed a few feet away and took a moment to take her in. She was heaving, covered in sweat and gravel, hair plastered in blood and sweat against her forehead, and there was more erupting in her eyes than he thought could be held inside one small person.

She was burning from the inside out.

“Good,” she screamed and ran toward him like an angry bull.

“Fucking back off, Uraraka,” he yelled, setting off a mild explosion, sending debris flying up at her, but she busted right through it,

activating her quirk on the bigger pieces.

“That was a weak ass explosion,” she yelled. “I know you can do better than that.”

“I’m not fucking fighting you like this, Uraraka,” he snarled, setting off another as he backed away from her. But that had been the wrong thing to say as she activated her quirk on herself and used one of the debris pieces to launch herself over his explosion and toward him like a bullet.

She looked possessed, rabid, boiling over with venom. He set off another explosion into the air, and she went spinning back. She deactivated her quirk and landed in a low crouch on her feet before she launched herself at him again.

And again.

And again.

Just like at the festival- except it was nothing like the festival. She looked nothing like the girl that had stood in front of him then- all fire and resolve. She staggered to her feet after another explosion sent her flying, this time, he saw tears streaming down her face, carving a path through the dirt and blood on her cheeks. She ran at him again, slowed significantly by the violent sobs racking her body. He held back on his explosions and let her get closer to him this time.

“Don’t fucking do that, Katsuki,” she screamed, throwing a punch. “Don’t let up on me!” He caught it easily and knocked it away. She was slower now, weaker. He could see how tired she was. “Not you! Fucking not you too.”

She took another weak swing, but he batted it away. She was well past her limit.

“The hell are you talking about?” he asked.

“Fight me!”

“No fucking way.”

“Punch me, Katsuki,” she all but begged as he slapped her kick away.

“What the hell is wrong with...”

She screamed, now going for an open palm bitch slap that he easily

back away from as she stumbled toward him, her limbs shaking so hard she could barely stand. "Everyone goes easy on me!" Her voice rattled with pain. "And maybe if everyone- if *anyone* - fought me like I was a fucking equal then..." She stopped suddenly and bent at the waist, holding herself tight as violent convulsions racked through her body.

What the hell was he supposed to do? What the hell was he supposed to say?

"Then maybe I could have saved myself!" She was screaming her voice raw, chased with a ragged sob. "Maybe..." she continued swinging violently at him, but there was almost no power to it, her brown eyes swimming with so much self-loathing that he had to look away. "Maybe I could've saved him! Maybe I wouldn't be so fucking weak! If anyone had ever taken me seriously, maybe I wouldn't be so fucking useless."

Her shaking legs buckled beneath her and sent her falling to the ground. She looked up at him, torn between wanting to slap him or run away.

"If anyone had treated me like a real hero- maybe none of this would have happened..." Her scream had stuttered into a strained whisper. "And I wouldn't be here..." she slammed her fist down into the ground, ripping the flesh of her knuckles. "I wouldn't be here. Maybe I'd be able to feel something...anything because..." her shoulders slumped, and she sunk lower into herself. "The only time I feel anything anymore, the only time I don't feel like a ghost is..." she shook her head.

Katsuki froze, a realization sinking into him as he watched her grind her fist into the gravel, one he couldn't believe that he had missed. He was so fucking stupid.

"Fuck that, Uraraka," he spat.

"Fuck you," she murmured, her gaze lowered defeatedly toward the ground.

"No," he yelled, crouching beside her and grabbing her wrist and jerking her fist away from the dirt and rocks before he let go and stood back up. "Fuck you." He was a fucking idiot, and now he felt like shit. "You..." he growled and turned his back to her- he could barely bring himself to look at her right now because he didn't want her to see the hurt he was sure was evident in his own eyes. He



exhaled slowly, trying to regain some composure, to find balance in the unbelievable tempest of emotions he had felt in the past hour alone. "That's why you wanted to train with me?" The question flew from his mouth before he could stop it. "...Because I'm the only one who would fight you hard enough to hurt you?"

She had thrown herself at his explosions like a mad-woman, never shrunk away from his punches or kicks- she had let him push her until she couldn't stand.

A soft sob escaped her chest, and he had to actively stop himself from turning to look at her because everything was too much right now.

"That's so..." he cut off the rest of his sentence. He didn't want to accuse her of anything because even in the midst of his own anger- he knew she was hurting, and for some reason, that still mattered to him. "Fuck..." he turned to look at her.

She was crumpled on the ground, like every bone in her body was shaking under the weight of her. She looked up at him through a half-lidded gaze, expectant and begging him for, well, anything.

"You don't get to do that to me, Uraraka," he said, looking down at her. It surprised him- it wasn't what he had meant to say- what he wanted to say- there was too much there he wasn't ready to process, but- still- it was all he could say. "Training to be stronger, or faster; fuck, even training because you're fucking scared..." he saw her eyes squeeze shut, the visceral reaction she always had when it was hinted at that she might be feeling that way. "I can do that. I can help you with that. But this..." he gestured around them and shook his head. "Fuck no...you don't get to use me to punish yourself because think you deserve it. I'm not gonna help you hate yourself because you think you're weak." Her shoulders were shaking, and her face was buried in her knees. "If that's all this is, then forget it. I'm out."

He began to walk away, leaving her sitting and shaking on the ground, but he stopped a few feet away, some nagging thought in the back of his head demanding to be spoken.

"Also," he said, suddenly, turning to face her one more time, but now she was staring forward, absent and frozen, nothing there; no fight, no flame, nothing. "In case you fucking forgot," he said. "You did save yourself, moron. No one found you. No one rescued you. You mangled your own fucking hands and fought your way out of that damn hole. You saved yourself and all of those people. Hate yourself if you want,

but at least do it for the right reasons.”

This time when he turned to walk away- he didn't look back.

# Fight or Flight or Freeze

## Chapter Summary

“This is why I feel like I’m broken.” Her throat choked on those words. “I have...I have so many people who love me and are so worried about me, but I don’t feel real when I’m around them...” she blinked away the sheen gathering in her eyes. “How can I not feel bad about that?”

“Because,” said Shoko, sitting back in her seat and shrugging, almost casually. “Right now, and I mean this in the best and kindest way, they don’t matter. It’s about you right now, and what you need and what you want is someone who looks at you and...”

“Knows I’m gonna come home...” she

## Chapter Notes

CW: descriptions of blood- it's not bad, just a cut finger but Ochako has some feelings about it.

Ochako lasted two days before she emailed Dr. Shoko. They had already had their weekly appointment, but this was... unbearable.

She felt like she couldn’t breathe. She didn’t even attempt to join her friends for meals and only responded to texts to let Deku know she was alive. Which she was- barely. But only just. It was hard to sit in class, to make conversation, to eat, while her body felt like it was being ripped apart. So she hid in her room, away from the continual scraping of something on her skin- the scraping of their worried eyes and pleading glances- pleading with her to let them help her.

But she didn’t know how.

And she wondered, alone in her bed, if she was broken beyond fixing, shattered beyond repair, sick in a way that she couldn’t get better from, no matter how hard she tried.

She had...she had hurt him.

And he had been right. She hated herself- hated how pathetic she was,

hated that no matter how strong she got, how fast she ran, she couldn't beat this. She couldn't hit hard enough or run fast enough or scream loud enough to get rid of all the hurt inside of her. She had liked the hurt, liked the pain, and that made her shudder and made her self-loathing grow beyond what she could manage, growing into a gaping black hole that was sucking out every last bit of her.

She wasn't suicidal.

She wasn't.

But she felt frozen; like she could fade away, disappear, or float into oblivion, and it would be okay.

She wouldn't fight it.

Was that the same as wanting to die?

She curled up in her bed and closed her eyes, ready to give way to the feeling, to the sensation, allowing herself to be swallowed in the icy tendrils- inches, centimeters, from her heart. She was tired- tired of fighting for every inch, tired of hating herself, tired of letting everyone down, tired of being so tired that she couldn't think straight.

She was ready to give up.

Ready to just surrender to whatever it was that she was becoming, but then, something stirred inside of her. Something nagging at the back of her mind, a voice, loud and angry that filled her consciousness, stirring her awake- a spark of something warm enough to jerk her back into her body before she floated away entirely.

She sat up, and before she could think about it, she wrote an email, asking Dr. Shoko if she could fit Ochako in one more time this week. She needed to...to get this out- to figure out how she could be better. Before she could freak out and retreat, she hit send, that voice in her head yelling at her the whole time:

*"In case you fucking forgot...You did save yourself, moron. No one found you. No one rescued you. You mangled your own fucking hands and fought your way out of that damn hole. You saved yourself and all of those people."*

###

Katsuki noticed that she was gone from homeroom that day. Of

course he did. He didn't feel guilty- he felt less angry- but he didn't feel guilty. He was worried about her, though. She needed help, he knew that, and she was- in theory- getting that. But he was worried.

The last time her desk was empty like that, she didn't come back for 2 months. When his phone dinged after his work-out, he looked down to see fucking Deku's number flashing in his text messages.

**Deku: She's okay, Kacchan. She had an appointment downtown today.**

**Katsuki: Bite me, Deku. I didn't ask.**

He didn't ask, and the nerd needed to learn to mind his own business. But, still, sometimes he was glad he didn't.

Even if he would never say it out loud.

###

Ochako didn't sit. She was afraid that if she sat, if she stopped moving, everything inside of her would settle, gather, and then combust inside of her.

"...What...what if he's right? What if I'm that fucked up?" Dr. Shoko sat in her usual spot as Ochako paced around the room. "Am I that sick?"

"Why do you think that you're sick, Ochako?"

"Because," she snapped like she was talking to an idiot. Ochako knew Shoko wasn't an idiot- quite the opposite-but still, she was pissed. "I can't...I can't fucking laugh like a normal person, and I'm actively seeking out physical harm."

"Well," said Shoko. "While I won't tell you anything about what you feel, I do want to assure you that it's not odd or unusual for people with severe trauma to seek out some kind of stimuli- even pain stimuli. Pain is one of the most obvious and bodily sensations, so it makes sense that you would seek it out."

Ochako let out a growl and pulled her hair at her scalp. "Well, how do...how do I make it stop?" she sighed. "I want to feel anything other

than rage and nothing.”

Dr. Shoko cocked her head to the side.

“Is that really all that feel, Ochako?”

Ochako glared at her, suddenly defensive. She could hear that there was a right answer to that question in the way Shoko had asked it. “Well, what the hell else am I feeling?” She looked at Dr. Shoko pleadingly. “Can you please just tell me,” she asked. “I’m so tired, and I’m treading water and...”

“You don’t feel nothing,” said Dr. Shoko, voice calm and direct. “You’re afraid, Ochako. You feel fear, and your body reacts to that fear in the way it did when it needed to stay alive.”

“Well, I’m...I’m not there anymore,” Ochako said, gesturing wildly to her surroundings, her voice rising frantically. “I don’t need to be afraid to stay alive anymore. So why can’t I shut it off?”

“That’s what we have to figure out,” said Dr. Shoko. “How to connect you back to your body, to cope with feeling unsafe so that you can heal your trauma without it overwhelming you.”

Ochako let her head fall back against the wall she was leaned against. “So, I gotta go through the thing to get to the other thing?”

Shoko smiled at her, kind and amused. “I’m afraid there’s no easy way through the pain, Ochako.”

Ochako squeezed her eyes shut and crossing the room to the chair, flopping onto it breathlessly. “This sucks.”

“It does.”

“None of this seems fair.”

“It’s not.”

Ochako sighed. “I don’t even know what afraid feels like anymore,” she said. “Because that’s all I am. If that is what I’m feeling, then I’m feeling it all the time, every second of every day except...” a sob caught in her throat, a dry, painful hiccup.

“Except what,” prodded Shoko gently.

“Except when Bakugo is beating the shit out of me...” she spat

bitterly. "Except for when I'm using him as a reverse punching bag like some kind of masochist."

"Is that what you were doing, Ochako?"

"Well, yeah," she said with a defeated shrug. "I mean, it's not the only thing. I did...I do...I wanted to train and get stronger, but I also hate myself for not being strong enough. So, I guess it killed two birds with one stone to fight against a guy who could squash me like a bug."

Shoko looked at her, with that same infuriatingly calm face that Ochako wanted to hate her for but couldn't quite bring herself to. She was pissed at Principal Nezu that she liked Dr. Shoko, even though she still thought all of this was stupid. "You don't think very highly of yourself right now, do you? Has that always been the case?"

Ochako didn't say anything. She didn't need to. Sure, before all this, she had normal insecurities. Sometimes she wished she had a stronger quirk, sometimes she felt guilty for the lives she couldn't protect, sometimes she hated the way her ass looked in jeans, but...she had never hated herself.

Not until now.

"I don't understand the question," she said finally.

"Okay," said Shoko, leaning forward in her chair. "Is there any context where you think Bakugo would want to be around you?"

Now Ochako was even more confused. "Why are we talking about Bakugo?"

"We're talking about you, and you said earlier that you aren't afraid when you're with him."

She shook her head, adamantly. "That's not what I said," she corrected defensively. "I said when he's beating the shit out of me, I'm not afraid."

"And that could have been anyone, then?" asked Shoko. "And it just happened to be him who offered?"

"Well, no," she said. "Because he's the only one who will fight me that hard; he's the only one who..." she paused, stumbling over her words. "Who goes all out against me."

“And how does that make you feel?”

“I...I don't...” she didn't know, she truly didn't know, and that panicked her. She once would have considered herself emotionally intelligent, as someone who could read her own feelings and the ones of those around her, with a fair amount of accuracy. And now it felt like she was drowning, breathless and dizzy, as she fumbled with what was inside of her.

That was the problem; she didn't know how she felt because everything was so blocked, scarred, and ruined- clogged with trauma and fear.

“Ochako...” she looked up, feeling the firm press of a hand against her palm, bringing her back to her body. “It's okay. Don't force it. If you don't know the answer to that, it's okay. It takes so much work to do what you're doing, to come back to your body and your emotions.” She let go of Ochako's hand and, almost shockingly, she found that she missed it, the tactile press against her palm. “Remember what I said about selective numbing?”

Ochako breathed in and out, slowly.

In and out.

She was safe.

Listen to her breathing.

Remember to breathe.

“That you can't do it,” Ochako asked, slowly. “That...” she closed her eyes and grabbed her knees. “You can't numb all the bad stuff and not the good.”

“Yes,” said Shoko. “So, do you think it's possible that maybe you're ignoring an emotion you feel when you're with Bakugo?”

Ochako recoiled slightly into the chair. “What do you mean?”

“Is it possible that maybe it's not just that you like the pain, maybe it's not just that you're punishing yourself, maybe you actually *enjoy* being around him, and you're struggling to identify that? And that the only card for attention you think you have to play is offering to let him kick your ass?”



"It's not about attention," said Ochako with a bitter laugh. "Trust me, I have plenty of people who want to give me that right now."

"When I say a bid for attention, it's not a bad thing," said Shoko. "It means you're trying to connect, and it's fine if you don't know how to connect right now with some of the people who are trying to connect with you."

"I don't know how to connect with Katsuki, either," she admitted. "It just happened." She paused and rubbed her face furiously before dropping them in exasperation. "We aren't even friends."

"Why?"

She closed her eyes- mentally going through all the reasons.

He was an ass.

He hated her best friend.

She was weak.

She was pathetic.

"It's okay to want to be around him," said Shoko. "It's okay, good even, for you to want something right now, even if your reasons aren't clear yet."

"Why would I?" she asked, almost sad and resigned. "This is why I feel like I'm broken." Her throat choked on those words. "I have...I have so many people who love me and are so worried about me, but I don't feel real when I'm around them..." she blinked away the sheen gathering in her eyes. "How can I not feel bad about that?"

"Because," said Shoko, sitting back in her seat and shrugging, almost casually. "Right now, and I mean this in the best and kindest way, they don't matter. It's about you right now, and what you need and what you want is someone who looks at you and..."

"Knows I'm gonna come home..." she said before she could stop herself, an honest answer pulled from her depths without thought.

It wasn't just that he fought her hard.

It wasn't just that she walked away bloody and bruised after a spar.

It wasn't just that she was using him to fill some pathological need to

punish herself.

“But I still shouldn’t have used him like that,” said Ochako. “He wasn’t wrong, either.”

“No, he wasn’t,” affirmed Shoko. “But I don’t want you to throw the baby out with the bathwater here. Try talking to him...”

Ochako scoffed and shook her head. “He doesn’t want...”

“Have you asked him?”

“He doesn’t want to waste his time with me. I’ve blown it already.”

She barely could stand how pathetic she was. There was no way Bakugo could tolerate it.

Shoko raised an eyebrow. “Have you asked him?” she repeated, an almost cheeky smirk on her face that somehow both frustrated her and made her feel like she was talking to a friend.

“No.”

“Well, you can do what you want,” said Shoko. “But I get the feeling that you’ll at least want to apologize to him.” She wasn’t wrong. “So, you might as well take that time to explain, if he’ll hear you. Because, keeping and building on the significant relationships in your life is important, and whether he’s your friend or not, he matters to you.”

She wasn’t wrong.

Shoko was rarely wrong, it seemed.

“Are you encouraging me to continue getting my ass kicked on the regular?”

Shoko laughed and rested her cheek against her fist, radiating that calmness that was setting Ochako more and more at ease. “Well, certainly not the extreme that you were, and not to punish yourself, but it’s not a bad way to take your body through the stress cycle when you’re in a fight or flight place. Physical activity is actually one of the best ways to cope with trauma. We just have to be careful that you draw good boundaries, so you don’t hurt yourself.”

Ochako had been so certain that something was wrong with her. That she had been so destroyed by that place that she didn’t know how to be human anymore. But for Shoko to speak about it like that, to even

encourage her to continue to explore some of that darkness and not bench her in the way Aizawa and All-Might had, to not freak out on her, was a complete and total relief. She hid so much about what she was feeling because she was certain any wrong move would send everyone around her into a tailspin of panic and end with her being committed.

“So, I’m...I’m not screwed up beyond help?” Ochako asked, her voice light and joking, but there was something else there that Ochako was sure that Shoko could hear.

“No,” said Shoko, shaking her head. “What happened to you is screwed up, Ochako. And you’re allowed to feel however you need to feel about the ways you’re working through it, but I want you to hear from me, that nothing you have told me about how you are surviving this shocks me.”

Ochako nodded and let out a sigh of relief that made her shoulder drop slightly from where they were bunched near her ears.

That was something.

She wasn’t a freak.

Maybe that place hadn’t ruined her after all.

###

Katsuki was on his way back to his room from the showers when he saw her standing outside his door- waiting for something. He paused at the stairs for a moment, watching as she raised her hand to knock and then dropped it nervously like she couldn’t work up the nerve. She pushed and pulled for a bit, almost knocking and then chickening out, before, finally she rapped on the wood and then jumped back like she had been bitten.

He was relieved to see her, to know that she was somewhat okay. But he wasn’t sure how he felt about her being outside his room. He was still trying to reconcile all that had happened the last time he saw her- all of the feelings that had churned through his body at that moment when he thought she was falling.

The pure naked panic that he was just not used to experiencing.

And then everything after. It had left him feeling gross and decidedly unheroic to know why she had gone to him in the first place. The fact that she had wanted someone to hurt her, and he had given it to her on a silver platter.

But still... he was relieved to see her.

“Oi...”

She jumped slightly and turned to face him like she had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. “Oh,” she said. “You’re...you’re there.” She rubbed the back of her head sheepishly and pointed at the door. “Not here...”

“Tch...” he paused outside of his door and looked down at her. She looked rough but not nearly as defeated and devastated as the last time he had seen her. At least now she looked a little like herself, or at least like her new self, whatever that was. “You need something?”

If she was put off by his tone or even noticed that it was particularly cold, she didn’t let on. But he supposed even before this that his withering Bakurage inexplicably had no deterring effect on her.

“Yes,” she answered and then shook her head. “Well, no, I don’t...” He leaned in just a little closer as she sputtered awkwardly, and he was surprised to find, for the first time in a long time, a dusting of pink on her cheeks, hardly as vibrant as it once was but still something familiar as she bashfully tried to explain herself. “But I just...I wanted to...it’s okay if you don’t have time or whatever, I’m sure you’re going to sleep soon, but I wanted to maybe...”

“Spit it out, Uraraka, or the answer is fucking no.”

“Can we talk?” she blurted out, obviously louder than she meant because she looked over her shoulder to make sure no one was lingering in the hallway. Katsuki opened his door without a word and flicked on his lights before stepping inside. He looked over his shoulder once to see her lingering in the doorway.

“Well, come on,” he barked.

She nodded and jumped inside. She shut the door almost closed but left it open just a crack. He wasn’t sure if it was for her sake or for his.

He gave his hair another quick tousle with the towel before dropping it into his hamper and then sitting on the edge of his desk, gripping it

tightly- watching to see where she would go. She took another tentative step inside, a nervous energy about her that he hadn't seen since she had returned. It had been a while since she had acted shy around him, if she ever had. She moved to the foot of his bed and sat there, her back to him.

"Are you gonna talk?" he asked. "Or just stare at my wall?"

She let out a shaky breath and nodded. "Yeah," she said. "If that's okay?"

He rolled his eyes. "Whatever." But he waited in silence until she decided to speak

"I...I went to see my therapist today."

It was her first time mentioning it to him. He had known- they all had known- but she hadn't talked about it. Not that it was a shameful secret- it would be weird if she wasn't seeing someone. If anything, it was weird that she was the only one at this damn school who was seeing a therapist. He waited for her to continue.

"And I...talked...we talked about you..."

"Eh?" That was a surprise.

She was holding herself, her fingers tightening and releasing around her shoulders. "I'm...I'm really sorry, Katsuki." Her voice hitched, and he was struck by the emotion it, and, once again, by the use of his given name. She had screamed it at him, half-crazed, pissed and taunting when they fought, like it had been a slip of the tongue. But this time, it was on purpose, her whole voice shaking with emotion. She had been so flat for the past two months, and this change was enough for him to lean closer, to listen. "I never should have put you in that position. I'm really not trying to make excuses, but I want you to understand- or at least explain."

He gripped the desk even tighter, keeping himself rooted there. He saw a small shudder go through her body like she was actively trying to keep herself from either fleeing or getting sick all over his carpet. He didn't really want either.

"Look, Uraraka," he said finally. "You don't have to fucking explain yourself..."

"I do," she interrupted. "I do, and I want to, and Dr. Shoko said it's

important that I start...that people are important if I want to get better.” She whispered the last part, as though it were a secret, as though it had been on the fucking down low that she wasn’t doing well.

“All that stuff I said out there at Ground Beta...I...” she shook her head. “You weren’t wrong. A part of that is- was- the pain. Some of it was because I hate myself so much right now that I can’t even breathe, and that isn’t...that’s something I’m trying to sort out with Dr. Shoko, but...that’s not on you, and I’m sorry I brought you into that. I really am.”

He didn’t know why his heart was hammering so hard, but he suddenly felt warm. He quickly wiped his sweaty hands on his shirt. He wasn’t used to apologies- giving or receiving them- and he wasn’t sure that he liked them- especially when they made his room feel like it was 105 degrees- not when they were so fucking loaded.

“But...I want you to know it was more than that too,” she whispered. “You...you were right. I’m afraid.” The confession fell from her with more ease than he had ever heard it from her, that thing she had denied with almost frantic urgency over the past few weeks like her life depended on keeping it a secret. “I’m afraid, every second, of every day, and it’s exhausting, and my body doesn’t know how to feel safe anymore.” He swallowed hard and looked anxiously toward his cracked door. He should go get someone. Racoon-Eyes was on this hall somewhere. Even Shitty Hair was more equipped for this than he was. So why had she knocked at his door?

“I’m afraid that I won’t make it through any of this,” she continued. “And all of the people who love me best, my parents, my friends- they all look at my like I’m some kind of miracle, that I’m the embodiment of every prayer that they’ve said these past few months, that they can’t believe I’m here.”

She choked on a dry heave and pressed a hand to her chest. Katsuki let go of the desk and shifted and sat on the side of his bed perpendicular to her and close to the headboard, neither of them looking at each other. He knew what she was talking about- he had seen that look more than once. “And I don’t even know that I made it out sometimes. And they can’t believe that I’m alive, so what chance do I really have? How strong could I really be?” Her voice sounded exhausted and ragged as her head bowed. “And then you brought me my notes.”

He straightened and turned his upper body, propping one knee up on his mattress so he could look at her, or her back at least.

“Huh?”

She let out a soft laugh, a whisper of a thing. “You never thought I wouldn’t come back.” He could hear the trembling vulnerability in her voice, and it made his head spin, and for some reason, it made her ears burn. “You knew I would, and I’m afraid all the time, and I hate myself more than I don’t, and I can’t imagine making it through this in one piece, no matter how hard I try. And when I fight you, and you go hard, I feel real. I feel like I’m here and that maybe...maybe it’s not a miracle that I’m here- maybe I fought like hell, and that’s why I’m here.” She let out a sound of frustration, stopping, and starting sentences like she didn’t know what to say next. “And that’s just generally how I feel when I’m around you.”

Fuck. Abort. Abort. He had a huge fucking ego, and people praised him regularly for a lot of things- but it was for his abilities, his strength, his mastery of his quirk- and this was so different. He wanted to run, to get out because he had no fucking idea what to do with all of this. But- also- he was Katsuki Bakugo, and he didn’t run from anything.

“My therapist said that I’m afraid of feeling anything, except rage, which is really the only thing I know I’m feeling- so I’ve been trying to turn everything off and that maybe...” she let out a sigh and whispered something under her breath, not loud enough for him to hear.

“Didn’t catch that, Uraraka,” he said. She let out another frustrated growl, and he laughed.

“I think...” she said. “I think I enjoy being around you,” she said, soft, like a confession. “I think I enjoy how you make me feel, and I didn’t recognize it. And I just assumed the only way you would ever let me hang around you is if we were...you know...fighting.”

She wasn’t wrong. They were not friends.

Except they were, in as much as Katsuki had friends. He worried about her, which was something friends did. He wanted Mineta to leave her the fuck alone. He supposed friends did that. He maybe sort of liked that she liked hanging around him because he didn’t hate it either. He liked that she wasn’t afraid of him (though he wouldn’t tell anyone that).

“So that’s...that’s all,” she said, shifting on the bed. She let out a shaky exhale and stood up. “That’s...I really just wanted you to know that it...it wasn’t that I picked you because I knew you’d fight me hard enough to hurt me.” She turned to look at him this time. “You’re not a villain. And I’m really sorry I made you feel that way.”

He stifled his growl- his instinct was to lash out- to tell her that he didn’t “feel” anything, that it didn’t matter. That she sure as fuck hadn’t hurt him.

“So...uh...thanks for letting me explain.” She walked past his bed and back toward his door. He was torn between relief, relief that she wasn’t asking anything of him, and offended that she would leave without letting him say anything to her.

“Oi,” he called. She paused, her hand on the knob, and faced him. “We can train together when you start eating better!” He pointedly avoided eye contact when she turned to look at him. “I think that’s why your speed plateaued.”

She stood for a moment, but he could hear the small smile in her voice when she spoke. “Sounds good, Katsuki,” she said, apparently just deciding that was his name now. He felt the tension in his jaw as he kept it clamped shut as if something was about to burst out without his say so. He let out a frustrated growl, as if he had just lost a battle with himself and yelled out to her once more.

“Oi, Uraraka!” She opened the door and poked her head inside. “I don’t hang out with people.”

“Oh, I know,” she said hurriedly. “I know that, and I wasn’t...”

“Don’t fucking interrupt me,” he barked. “I don’t hang out with people, but...” he looked up at the ceiling. “We’re fucking friends or whatever...” he muttered, a flush rushing up his neck. God, he sounded so dumb.

“Katsuki,” she whispered. “You really don’t have...”

“I know I don’t fucking have to,” he interrupted. “Just don’t expect me to be all warm and shit- I’m not fucking Deku or Four-Eyes.”

She smirked at him from where she was peeking inside.

“I know,” she said.



“Now go away,” he said, shooing at her. “I’m going to bed.”

This time her smirk turned up into maybe one of the bigger smiles he had seen from her since coming here- not as big as it used to be, but big by this new standard.

Maybe he wouldn’t suck at this as much as he thought.

###

After her altercation with Katsuki, Ochako had not had any time or space or bandwidth to even think about the Purple Pustule. But Mina had told her, delighted, that he had been moved out of the dorms.

No goodbye.

No explanation given.

Not that one was needed.

So, it wasn’t a surprise when he wasn’t in class. But it was a surprise, a good one, when a purple-haired, mind-manipulator sauntered into the class like he had always been there, like he should have been there from the beginning.

Shinso paused beside her briefly and tapped his knuckles on her desk. She looked up to see him smirking like a conspirator.

“Fancy seeing you here,” she said.

“I know,” he returned with a dramatic shrug. “Crazy, right?”

He gave her desk another tap before he continued toward his desk. “Shinso,” she called, turning to look over her shoulder at her new classmate. “If they are moving you to Mineta’s room, make sure that they deep clean it.”

Shinso pointed at her thoughtfully. “Smart...smart...”

Ochako turned back to face the front of the room, feeling, for a moment, just a little lighter.

###

“Before we even touch the source of your trauma, you have to learn to pay attention to your body- listen to it. It’s okay if you don’t know what the feeling is but notice where you feel it- is it a crushing in your chest, goosebumps, a headache, fatigue...often, your body will know something is wrong before anything else does, and when you learn to catch that you can prepare yourself. You can take control of how you are going to cope before you feel like you’re drowning.”

Ochako nodded. She didn’t know what it all meant; it felt like wading through a forest of thorns and quicksand.

But she could try.

Because...well...what else was she going to do? She wasn’t getting any better, but she was terrified. Deeply terrified of what she would have to go through to get to better.

###

Ochako tried to let go of some of the resentment of being cut out of her combat classes. She was really trying, though most of it was holding firm. But that being said, there were a few days where she finished her private lessons with Aizawa early, days where she returned first back to the dorms. It gave her time to sit in the common area near the windows and feel the sun.

It gave her time.

So, she was surprised to find Shoto in the kitchen when she returned, cutting vegetables at the counter.

“Shoto,” she said with a small smile. “What are you doing here?”

He looked up from his vegetables as she approached him. “Oh,” he said. “Unfortunately, Tokoyami dislocated my shoulder in combat.”

“Shoto,” she said, dropping her bag on the couch and hurrying toward him, checking him over. “Did you see Recovery Girl?”

“Oh yes,” he said with a nod. “But she insisted I skip the rest of combat, so I thought I’d get started on dinner.” She nodded.

“Do you...do you need any help?”

“No,” he said. “It’s simple enough. I’m making some for Izuku as well.”

She smiled softly at the admission. “Good,” she said. The chopping stopped suddenly, and Shoto was looking at her curiously.

“Would you...would you like some too?”

“Oh no,” she said, shaking her head. “I’ll have dinner later, and I have plenty of...”

“Is it a particular taste that makes you sick?” he interrupted suddenly. “If so, I can avoid...”

“No, really, Shoto,” she insisted. “It’s really sweet of you to ask, but I’m still...”

Still what?

Still not even sure what her body wants or craves or can eat?

Something like that.

“I’m okay,” she finished.

He nodded. Thankfully, his lack of social awareness kept him from asking multiple times in the way a more “polite” person might- he took her refusal at face value and didn’t press the matter.

“I will make some tea, though,” she added. “Would you like some?”

“Thank you,” he said. “I would love some.”

“You know,” said Ochako, preparing the water to boil on the stove. “I’ve never dislocated my shoulder.” She had sustained many injuries over the past two years, a lot over the past few months, but never that one.

“It’s not the most pleasant injury,” he said with a shrug. “But certainly not the worst.”

She nodded.

She was about to ask him what his worst injury was but then stopped herself- uncertain if it would be at all related to the scar on his face. She didn’t know if he was sensitive about it or not. She didn’t know him well enough to know the backstory, and she didn’t want to risk it.

“Have you been able to gain any more understanding of your quirk?”

She considered the question and wondered if this was him being polite to Deku's friend or if he was genuinely curious. She supposed it didn't really matter. Dr. Shoko said connecting with people was one of the best ways to teach her body that it wasn't in danger- that she was safe with the people she was with. It didn't have to be big, Shoko had assured her.

Fake it until you make it.

And small talk with her best friends' kind-of-boyfriend was a good enough place to start as any.

"Well, I'm learning a lot but still don't really know how to control it." She looked down at her fingers, at the jagged scars. "Last time, I was able to manipulate the gravity of objects in a certain radius, which was..."

"Very useful," said Shoto, turning to face her.

"Yeah," she said, leaning against the counter. "Too bad I can only really use it when I panic myself so badly it feels like I'm going to die."

Shoto snorted and turned back to his vegetables and continued chopping. "Well, yes," he said. "But you can learn how to get past that. My flame becomes extremely unruly when I am emotionally provoked."

Like Deku had done at the Sport's Festival.

"You learn, but for now, knowing the trigger will help you gain control."

That was true. Though it was also true that that near-constant panic and adrenaline was destroying her body, breaking it down inch-by-inch. But maybe Shoto had some knowledge of that. She couldn't imagine that Endeavor had been a merciful teacher.

"I guess you're right," she said.

"Of course I am, I ..." a sharp intake of breath and a surprised sound interrupted his thought, and then the clattering of the knife.

"Oww," he said, voice calm and deadpan as ever.

"Shoto," she gasped, grabbing a clean rag and hurrying over to him.

"It's not bad," he assured, but Ochako could see the deep slice on the pad of his finger, sending a red river down his palm and wrist, disappearing under the sleeve of his shirt. She hurriedly wrapped the rag around his finger and pushed his sleeve up to his elbow to wipe at the blood.

"One sec," she said. "I think there's a first-aid kit around here..." she hopped onto the counter to reach one of the cabinets.

"What is the purpose of putting it up so high?" Shoto mused out loud. Ochako reached up to grab the small box and then hop down onto the ground. When she turned to look at Shoto, the small rag around his finger was already soaked with blood.

She froze.

Too much blood.

Shoto cocked his head to the side curiously. "Are you alright?" he asked. She blinked furiously, trying to shake off the feeling, the taste, the texture, the smell of blood that hit her like a wave. She opened the box, her hand shaking as a cold chill moved through her body.

She wasn't squeamish. Never had been.

She had no problem with blood- so why was she shaking like this. She pulled out gauze and a bandage before she gestured for Shoto to remove the rag. Immediately, the flap started to bleed. She swallowed and pulled out the gauze to wrap it.

"Here," she said, reaching out and wrapping it. She knew it wasn't serious, but all the same, her head was spinning just a little.

"You don't look well," he said, looking past his finger at her. "Do you have issues with blood?"

"No," she choked, taping the gauze to his finger.

"You sure?" he pressed. "You're pale."

"I'm always pale," she asserted.

"Paler, then..."

She snorted and pulled away from him hurriedly and scrambled to her feet, trying to stop the wave of fear and sickness rolling through her. She leaned heavily against the counter and tried to focus like Dr.

Shoko said.

What was she feeling?

Why was she...

She quickly bolted to the sink and threw herself over it- momentarily relieved that Shoto was the only one here as she heaved like a sick cat clinging to the sink.

"Dammit," she heaved. It wasn't a lot, but it was still gross and embarrassing, and she trembled with frustration at herself. She quickly raised a shaking hand to run the water and drain the spit and bile before cupping her hand under the stream and bringing it up to her lips to wash out her mouth. She looked over her shoulder briefly to find Shoto now standing upright, his finger still out, watching her closely- though he didn't seem put out. Rather he grabbed a rag and handed it to her. She accepted it gratefully.

"Thanks," she said, accepting it to wipe at her mouth. "Sorry."

"Why?" he asked, sounding genuinely confused. She smirked and braced herself against the counter.

"No reason," she said. "Just..." she shook her head. "I...I think I'm going to head to my room if you're okay?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm fine. Thank you. Are you?"

"Yeah," she said, relatively speaking, it wasn't a lie. "I'm just a little run down." She didn't look back at him when she hurried toward the stairs, the same questions running through her head.

What are you feeling?

Why are you feeling it?

Where are you feeling it?

*Fucking everything. Everywhere.*

She hurried up the stairs, taking them several at a time.

*But why?*

She had been okay today. She had been doing fine, and then suddenly, she was sick and chilled and dizzy and overwhelmed. Maybe she

wanted to nap? For just a little?

She should say hi to her friends later; they were supposed to study together after dinner, so she should go down there. She sat on her bed, tentatively. So far, sleep had been nearly non-existent- taken sparsely and light and fitful, with her waking up every five minutes without ever being able to remember why.

She pulled back the covers and was about to sink into the pillow when she heard a light knock on the door. She jumped out of bed and straightened out her skirt, her hair, trying to not look like she had been about to lay down. She wasn't sure why it mattered.

But when she opened the door, she found the hallway empty. She was about to close the door when she looked down and saw the cup of tea sitting on a saucer in front of her. She had forgotten. She bent to pick it up carefully and smiled as she inhaled the chamomile.

She made a mental note to reassure Izuku that she approved of his choice.

###

Drip...

Drip...

Drip...

Why was it so cold?

Why was she so hungry?

What was that smell?

What was that sound?

Drip...

Drip...

Drip...

Something wet was hitting her, like rain- just thicker and sticky.

*“And it’s another kill from our sexy little sister! She may be cute in that skirt, but she’s deadly.”*

A hand tightened around hers-gripping and bruising the bone. She followed the line of the hand, the wrist, the forearm, to a face with wide, frightened eyes looking up at her.

The boy.

The first one that she killed.



And his blood.

Hot. Sticky. Thick.

It was everywhere. Just everywhere.

She was choking on it.

She was drowning in it.

###

Katsuki actually wasn't sure if anything would even change- so far, the only difference was that they *weren't* training, which, to be fair, was his condition until she started eating better, until she started looking a little less like the walking dead.

But he supposed they were friends now, and he really didn't know what it meant- at least while she was in this state, when everything about Uraraka was off. So, right now, he just watched her. He was good enough at that. He knew how to pay attention, how to study.

That was the only way to get good at shit.

When she came downstairs to join her friends, her real friends, the ones who actually knew how to be friends, the first thing he noticed was that she was wearing his hoodie.

So, she liked it.

Was she going to give it back?

Should he ask? It was a black, non-descript hoodie, so no one except fucking Shitty Hair knew it was his- all though anyone with eyes could tell that it clearly wasn't hers, but, then, he supposed she was swimming in most of her clothes lately. Even the ones that did belong to her.

"Yo..."

Shitty Hair elbowed him from his spot beside him. "You're spacing out, bro."

Katsuki took the last bite of his dinner and stood up. "No, I'm not," he growled. He moved to leave the common room; it was getting too

crowded from dinner and evening study groups. He stopped at the stairs and looked at her closely.

She looked ruffled and tired- like she had just woken up. But she was *trying* to engage with her study group, but it was clearly a battle to anyone paying attention, like she was actively trying to keep herself present in the conversation.

*Had she eaten dinner?*

He took out his phone and started texting as he walked up the stairs, away from prying and nosy eyes.

**Katsuki: Eat a damn banana today. They are on the counter by the fridge.**

He hit send and pocketed his phone quickly, ignoring the immediate burning on the tips of his ears as he hurried the rest of the way to his room.

Didn't need her passing out when they did start training again.

###

"No quirks," prompted Katsuki, shaking out his arms and bobbing in place. "And no trying to murder me this time."

"Oh please," said Uraraka, standing up from the ground, brushing the earth off of her pants. "I wasn't trying to murder you."

"Tch...whatever...just a light spar," he repeated pointedly. "Still ain't convinced you're sleeping enough for this."

She rolled her eyes, but she didn't argue with him, probably because she knew that she couldn't. She did seem to be doing a little better... well, not better, but different. She looked like she was often on the verge of tears or fighting the urge to scream, run, or fight.

But it was a step away from where she had been, defeated, and hallowed out, even if she did look exhausted. And she was trying at least. She was at most meals, though she pushed her food around on her plate like a fucking toddler more than she ate it. So he knew she wasn't ready for anything intense, but he also read in his cursory and secret research into trauma that movement was good. But making sure

neither of them went too far or too hard was a challenge, given both of their natures.

Though, he was relieved to find that when they did start trading blows, she was a far cry from the possessed creature he had been training with a few weeks ago. She was moving and breathing less like a machine and more like an underfed, sleep-deprived human.

It meant she was slower.

It meant that she felt the pain and pull and wear and tear of her muscles. Already a marked difference from where she had been. Immediately more painful, but, overall, far more natural and less disturbing to watch.

“How’s quirk practice going?”

She snorted. “Quiet,” she breathed, dodging out of his reach. “He’s frustrated, but he won’t tell me.”

Katsuki leaned back to avoid the swing of her foot. “What’s your deal with him,” he snorted, snapping back upright.

“Nothing,” she shouted.

“Whatever,” returned Katsuki. “He’s the only besides me that you’re a bitch too.”

She lunged at him, but she wasn’t quick enough to avoid the headlock he maneuvered her into. “No. I’m...” she elbowed him hard in the stomach creating enough wiggle room for her to slide free from his grasp. “NOT!”

“Tch...” he scoffed. “Yes, you are. And I’m sure you have your reasons for hating the guy, but...”

She landed a sharp, high kick to his shoulder.

“I don’t hate hi...”

She didn’t quite finish her objection before she was on the ground, face first. She moved to stand, but he was on her before she could push herself up, his knees in the ground on either side of her, pushing her down. One of his hands was wrapped around her wrist, pinning it to her side, while the other one pressed between her shoulder blades, keeping her down.

“Don’t lie to me,” he said. “Feel free to tell me it’s none of my fucking business but don’t...” he stopped, suddenly, realizing she wasn’t moving beneath him, wasn’t trying to force him off like she normally would. In fact, her whole body had gone completely slack. “Uraraka...” he said, leaning over and trying to get a look at her face, but it was turned slightly into the ground. “Are you hurt?”

None of his moves had been particularly rough or aggressive, his grip on her wrist was firm, but there was plenty of give for her to pull away. His palms were sweaty but not explosive.

And this certainly wasn’t the first time that he had pinned her. He let go of her wrist and shifted off of her to his knees.

“Oi...Uraraka.. what’s wrong?”

He reached out to press two fingers to her wrist to feel her rapid, frantic pulse before he shuffled on his knees to her other side so he could see her face. Her left cheek and the corner of her mouth were in the dirt, and she was staring out, eyes unblinking and glassy with tears, her bottom lip trembling as the rest of her body stayed motionless.

*“When animals feel as though they can neither fight nor escape a threat, the body will often shut down and become paralyzed with fear; chemicals are secreted to serve as an analgesic, so the pain or injury is experienced with less intensity.”*

Katsuki wasn’t so good at this naturally, but he was a good studier. When he was bad at things, he became good at them; he worked until he was the fucking best.

“Uraraka,” he said, moving from his knees to a seated position by her head. “You know you’re safe, right?” She didn’t respond. “You’re on UA grounds, the same place we spar every time. You’re with me,” he added. “So, you’re safe.”

She let out a shaky breath, a good sign, he thought. And she blinked, releasing two streams of tears, one falling into the dirt and the other down the slight arch of her cheekbone. Despite everything, it was an unfamiliar sight. He didn’t remember her crying a lot when she first came back.

“I’m...I’m sorry,” she whispered, closing her eyes tight. “I don’t...I don’t know what happened...”

Katsuki had an idea of what happened, but he wouldn't ask her if she didn't want to say anything. Though, eventually, he would like to know if it was a fluke- or something specific. He had pinned her, hit her, and come at her with a hell of a lot more ferocity than that.

*So was it his position? Hers? His hand on her wrist? His hand on her back?*

He could adjust any of that pretty easily.

"Do you want to head back?" he asked. She swallowed hard, another tear dropping from her lashes.

"I can't...I can't..." She let out a sad, bitter laugh. "I can't move."

*"Immobilized by fear and panic, the body's nervous system shuts down."*

"Okay," he said with a nod, before shifting slightly and laying on his back beside her and putting his hands behind his head to make a pillow. "We'll just nap here then."

She let out a small, pained laugh and dug her fingers into the dirt, seeking out some sensation other than whatever the hell it was that was happening in her body.

"Naps in the sun make me feel like a lizard," she said, a little bit of strength returning to her voice.

"Tch...dumbass."

He breathed in and out, loud and exaggerated, and after a few beats, he could hear her breathing sync up with his, evening out.

"What are you having for dinner, Katsuki?" she asked.

He raised an eyebrow, but he indulged her all the same. "Salmon and rice."

She hummed and closed her eyes tight. When she opened them, they were a little more focused and clearer. "Make me some rice?"

He scoffed, but there was no bite to it. "The fuck would I do that?"

She shifted slightly, sensation seeming to return to her body. "Friends feed friends rice."

"Tch...no one told me that."

“It’s in the rule book.”

She pressed both of her palms into the ground and pushed herself up and into a sitting position. “Fine,” he said. “I’ll make you some damn rice as long as you don’t tell anyone where that bland shit, devoid of any flavor, came from.”

“Thanks, Katsuki.”

“Whatever,” he muttered. “It’s just rice.”

She nodded and stood up, brushing the forest floor off her knees and calves.

“Better,” he asked when she straightened out.

“Yeah,” she said with an embarrassed nod. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Yeah, you said that,” he said, standing up to join her. “Now come on. If I’m gonna slave away as your personal chef, then I need to get back to the dorms.”

She scoffed and stood up.

“Aren’t you just throwing a handful of rice into a pot?”

“Tch...keep that up, and it’ll be a teaspoon, you brat.”

She laughed and fell in beside him as they walked back to the dorms.

“You spoil me,” she teased.

“Tell me about it.”

###

She hated it.

She hated it.

It was so fucking stupid.

She was so fucking stupid.

And why was this suddenly happening?

She squeezed her eyes shut and buried a sob into the pillow.

She had known this was going to happen.

She fucking knew it, and Dr. Shoko hadn't listened to her.

Ochako had had it under control.

She just had decided not to think about it. To distract herself. She had taught her brain to just go somewhere else at every threat- including the danger of those memories.

Especially the fucking memories.

She let out a hoars sob and clutched the pillow hard. She had been sparring, and suddenly, just like that, she had been face-down in one of those disgusting beds again, the ones that wreaked of sweat and blood and alcohol.

She had been sparring, and suddenly, she was naked, a hand shoved violently into her back or buried in her hair, forcing her face into the bed.

She was there, and then she wasn't.

And she couldn't do anything about it.

She hated it.

Hated how fucking weak she was.

###

That night she dreamed again before waking abruptly, gasping and sputtering; her clock blinking 3:20 am. She woke to the state of liquor and the overwhelming scent of thick, sweet colognes; to hands groping, reaching and taking.

She woke crying, sobbing, and alone.

# Until They Do

## Chapter Summary

Ochako tries to do something normal and wonders if she'll be able to do anything normal ever again.

This was good. This was...normal.

Dr. Shoko had encouraged her to participate in stuff like this. She had told her over and over again that people were going to be the most important thing. If she had people who loved her, then she would need to connect with them. It was okay if it was slow. It was okay if it was different than it once was. But that connection was like a tether.

It would be one of the things she would be grateful to have when she waded deeper into all the crap she was still so terrified of.

So she fought her natural instinct right now to make an excuse, to say that she couldn't go when Mina told her they were having a weekend sleepover at her house. It was for girl-bonding time, Mina had insisted, and Ochako wondered if that was the card that Mina had played to get all six of the girl's weekend passes.

She had said yes because these were the kinds of things that girls were supposed to do.

She packed her pajamas and an outfit for tomorrow, along with her toiletries.

This was important.

She was trying.

Mina had told them to dress for a night out. Whatever that meant. She didn't really have anything for that. Not really. She had leggings and a tunic shirt. That would work. Maybe Mina would have an accessory to pair it with.

It had been a while since she had worn anything that would be considered feminine- something that would be considered her style- any time she attempted something in that vein, she was seized with a level of self-scrutiny that was too much to contend with in her current state. Any attempt to make herself look "pretty" or "feminine" meant she was flooded with questions and insecurity.



*Was she on display?*

*Was she grabbable?*

*Was she too accessible?*

*Viewable?*

It made her skin crawl and her heart race.

She stepped out into the hall and made her way toward the stairs, just as they opened. She jumped backward, avoiding the swing before she saw the familiar blonde hair through the glass window of the door.

“Oh, hey Katsuki,” she said.

He nodded at her before his eyes fell on her bag. “Runnin’ away?”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh yes,” she said. “With a duffel bag, one outfit, and a toothbrush.”

“So basically, all your earthly possessions, right?” He asked with that shit-eating smirk.

She let out a laugh. “First off, rude,” she said. “And second, as if I would ever leave without my impressive sneaker collection.”

He shrugged in ascension to her point. “True, your sneaker game is strong.”

She laughed and shook out her foot at him. “Mina’s sleepover thing.”

“Eh?”

“The girls are going to her house for a sleepover.”

He looked at her for a moment, as if he was trying to string together her words in order to make a coherent sentence in his head before he nodded.

“Right...” they stood in silence, him looking at her with a scrutinizing scowl knitted into his brow. “Well, don’t get too crazy,” he finally said.

“Well,” she said. “It’s Mina. So... no promises.”

He shrugged. “Fair enough.”

###

Ochako looked at all the girls around her- getting ready. They were, all of them so beautiful, and she felt...well...like an alien, observing their behavior, wanting to be part of it, but certain she'd be found out if she spoke.

"Ochako," called Toru. "Come here!"

Ochako moved to the invisible hero who was seated on the floor. "I have a palette for golden-brown eyes that will make yours just pop!" Ochako swallowed hard and exhaled.

Where did she feel it?

*In her legs.*

*In her pelvis.*

*In her jaw.*

"Can I?!"

Ochako smiled tightly and nodded.

It was Mina's birthday- this was not about her, not at all.

"Sure," she said. And Toru squealed excitedly. "You'll look so good, babe!"

*"You looked so good out there, baby girl."*

That wasn't this, she reminded herself over and over again. Mina wanted everyone to feel good- and happy and beautiful. So she let Toru do her eyes and blush and lips.

She smiled into the mirror when Toru told her to look at herself. Ochako nodded and complimented Toru on her skills, and Mina bounced around her happily.

But all she wanted to do was run to the bathroom and scrub it all off.

She felt it on her lips.

On her cheeks.

On her eyes.

Suffocating, heavy, thick, and hot.

Making her look sexy.

Dressing her up like a prized animal being led to the slaughter.

But she kept it to herself because she had no idea how to tell them any of that. How could she tell them that the last time she wore makeup, it had bled down her face from the heat of those lights, mixing with blood and sweat and tears? How could she tell them that she was dressed up every morning like a damn doll?

She knew this wasn't the same thing. She knew it. But some part of her didn't- and right now, it was the loudest part.

###

Dinner was fine- actually, it was even fun. Ochako laughed even, ate a little bit more than usual- the good energy and the conversation around their table at the ramen place enough to energize her a little.

She posed for group pictures.

She smiled.

She laughed.

She ate.

And then Mina rolled into part two of the night- a dance club. And though Momo seemed to have a few objections about a group of UA students going anywhere that might be considered unsavory, even if it was legal, Mina insisted the place was clean and safe and fun and open for minors. And Ochako was a little disappointed that this assuaged Momo's objections, as she would have certainly welcomed a deterrent to this part of the night.

There were just so many people; every nook and cranny was crammed with sweaty bodies, and the music pulsed through her with loud, unpleasant vibrations that shook her bones.

Which was a shame- she used to love to dance and had joined the girls in her class for several de-stress dance parties in the dorm. Now she doubted she even knew how to dance anymore- she didn't know what to do with this awkward, bony body anymore that felt so distant from who she had been for sixteen years.

Plus, the smell and the smoke and the lights were so overwhelming. She could barely even think straight. She fought her way through one song with her friends before she excused herself: shoving through the crowded dance floor.

*"Here, she comes! It's Sexy Little Sister, give it up, people!"*

The lights, the sweat, the raised voices, the makeup. It was just too much. She broke through the throngs of people and pressed herself against the nearest wall and bent at the waist, collecting herself, trying to break out of the intrusive memory invading her brain.

*She was at a club.*

*Surrounded by friends.*

*She could leave whenever she wanted.*

*She wasn't trapped.*

*She breathed in and out.*

*In and out.*

*She was safe.*

And for some reason, she heard it in a very specific voice- the one that spoke them when her body had locked up and betrayed her.

*"You're with me, so you're safe."*

She leaned back against the wall- somewhat settled and proud of herself for handling it. She took out her phone and scrolled mindlessly, already seeing pictures from the night on Mina's social media.

*Girl was fast.*

Ochako looked at her friends and felt a pang of guilt. She loved them all, and they loved her- and yet she was still afraid all the time, still unable to reach out and connect and take the help they were always

offering.

She knew intellectually she was lucky. She thought briefly (only briefly) of Li- he had no one. No one was looking for him- no one missed him. No one except for her. And here she was- with so many people who were tripping over themselves to help her, and all she did was worry them- all she did was give small smiles and half-hearted attempts to have fun and be happy.

They deserved better.

*Better than her.*

Her thoughts were interrupted when she heard a screech. She leaped from the wall and turned toward it, ready to fight, ready to jump into action. A man had thrown a woman over his shoulder a few yards away. She was kicking her legs and hitting him on the back.

Ochako ran toward the disruption, only to stumble to an abrupt stop when the man shifted slightly, giving Ochako a clear view of the woman's face, flushed red, a bright smile. Her playful screams descended into giggles as the man spun her around.

Ochako stepped away, but her heart was pounding now, her breathing shallow, and her mind was racing. Someone bumped into her, and she jumped. Every part of her body was on high alert, every nerve on edge.

Someone asked her to dance, and she all but shoved them away.

Her eyes darted around to all the drinks around her, panicked that someone would take advantage of an unattended glass.

They all looked normal- like good people out enjoying their night, but so many of the people who came to scream for blood, who waited for her in those rooms, so many of those people looked normal too.

And they were villains.

The kind of villains you couldn't tell by looking, which made it so much worse- it made her feel panicked and trapped and angry.

Any one of them could do it.

Any of the people here could hurt, exploit, trap, or destroy any of them, and she had no way of knowing.

All of them were capable of horrible, monstrous things.

She gasped desperately, trying to catch a gulp of air, but her throat felt like it was closing, and the room was spinning, and her head was pounding, and she couldn't hear anything over the music.

She stumbled forward and pushed her way back onto the dance floor towards her friends; ignoring the claustrophobic feeling squeezing at her heart as she moved closer, as the bodies bumped and bobbed and swung around her, sweaty arms and legs and backs brushed against her, tossing her around like a boat in a storm.

This was too much.

Too much.

She fought and shoved her way to them. They were all still together, jumping and laughing and yelling over the music. She couldn't quite make sense of the panic, but she was suddenly seized with a need to know where they were. To make sure they were all here.

Anyone here could be a monster.

Anyone here could do horrible things.

She couldn't watch everyone. She couldn't keep her eyes on everyone.

She couldn't breathe.

She couldn't think.

Her eyes scanned the group of friends in front of her.

*Mina.*

*Tsu.*

*Toru.*

*Jirou.*

Her blood ran cold, and she looked around frantically.

*Mina.*

*Tsu.*

*Toru.*

*Jirou.*

Oh god. Oh god. Oh god. She looked around the dance floor. Anyone here could be a villain. Anyone here could hurt her.

*Momo .*

She was tall. She was beautiful. Perfect. Impossible to miss. A monster would definitely notice Momo.

“Ochako...” her eyes landed on Tsu, who was standing in front of her, clearly concerned. “What’s wrong. Are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” she said, almost at a yell over the loud music. “Have... have you seen Momo?”

“Momo?”

She nodded and looked around. “Yeah,” she answered. “I don’t see her anywhere. I don’t see her.”

Mina settled beside her, mid-dance, sweaty and smiling. “What’s up, Chako?”

“Momo,” she said. “Have you seen her?”

“I think she went to the bathroom.”

Ochako turned from them both, ignoring their concerned calls, and ran to the bathroom as fast she could. Every second could mean a second too late.

A second too far.

She shoved through groups, separated dancing couples, and walked along the long line to the girl’s restroom, checking each girl waiting until she got to the bathroom. A few girls protested as she pushed her way to the front, but she ignored them and walked up to the four stalls.

“Momo!”

She went to each stall and knocked. “Momo? Are you in here?”

No answer.

Fuck. She hurried back out as fast as she could. The whole room was spinning. Every sound seemed magnified in her ears; every smell, every sound was too much, overwhelming her senses. She pressed her hand to her chest, trying to feel her heartbeat, trying to pay attention, to listen to it. Still, she couldn't think about anything else besides Momo bound and drugged in the back of some monster's van.

She ran as fast as she could to the exit. What if she was just outside- just within reach.

If she was fast enough (smart enough, strong enough), she could get there in time. This time she could do it.

She could save Momo (save Li).

She burst through the door and into the cold, night air. She spun around, searching the street, car windows, the faces of the people gathered outside, smoking and chatting as if everything was normal- as if everything was fine.

As if...

"Uraraka!" Ochako felt her heart plummet into her stomach, and she froze, her back toward the voice. "Uraraka, are you okay?" She squeezed her eyes shut and drew in a deep breath. She was stupid, so stupid. She turned slowly to see Momo standing behind her- dark eyes wide with concern.

"Yeah," Ochako answered weakly, suddenly feeling faint. "Just uh... just checking on you." Ochako looked down, averting her eyes in the hopes that Momo would not see the panic there. She felt it in her feet like she was sinking beneath herself into the ground.

She felt it in her quacking knees- in her shaking hands. Buzzing against her skin.

She felt it everywhere.

All at once.

"I'm okay," said Momo. "Tenya wanted to check in on us and make sure that we were safe."

Of course, he did.

He was good.



Momo was good.

People were good.

“Good,” said Ochako, taking a step back. “Uh...Momo, I’m....I think I need to leave...”

“What?”

“I’m not...I’m not feeling well.”

Momo took a few steps toward her. “Are you ill?” She reached out a hand, but Ochako shifted away from her reach.

“No,” she said. “No. I’m just...feeling really tired and overheated. I think...I think I’m going to go back to school.”

“Ochako,” said Momo. “You can’t walk back alone, it’s...”

“It’s fine,” interrupted Ochako. Guilt twisted in her gut. “I used to live around here. It’s really close.” She turned and started walking away. “I can get back safe.”

“Ochako, I don’t want...”

“I’ll text you when I get there,” she said, turning again, walking backward away from Momo. “I promise. Please tell Mina I’m sorry. I just...I feel sick, and I need...I really need to go.”

She didn’t give Momo another chance to object or to call out. She was already walking away, breathing in the cold air, trying to cool off her overheated skin, trying to fight off her nausea and settle the churning in her stomach.

She didn’t know she was crying until the wind picked up and hit her face, chilling her moistened cheeks.

###

“Don’t you fucking think about it, Shitty Hair.”

“I’m sorry, bro!”

“Don’t fucking do it!”

“Shit, he’s gonna do it.”

“I’ll fucking kill you!”

“Sorry, man!”

Kirishima let his shell fly- throwing Luigi/Katsuki off of the rainbow road in one violent swoop.

“What the fuck?!” Katsuki roared, throwing down his controller. “We had an alliance!”

“Necessary sacrifice for victory.”

Kirishima crossed the finish line, and a number one flashed across the screen. Shitty Hair let out a whoop of victory before he jumped up and threw his hands in the air.

“I am the champi...” Katsuki punched him hard in the stomach sending back on the couch.

“Ooowe,” he whined, breathlessly from where he was slumped on the cushion. “Why?!”

“Because you’re fucking obnoxious,” Katsuki grumbled before standing to make space for Dunc-Face to take his spot.

“Come on, Shinsou,” said Pikachu, gesturing Droopy Dog over to the couch to take Shitty Hair’s spot. “This is your official induction to our class,” the idiot exclaimed. “Sit down.”

Mind-Fuck looked up from his phone. “I’m...I’m already sitting.”

Pikachu glared at him and pointed to the spot beside him. “Right here.”

Shinso smirked but pocketed his phone and slid into the spot beside Pikachu. Katsuki rolled his eyes and went to the kitchen to grab a drink. “Hey, dude!”

Katsuki looked over his shoulder as Shitty Hair padded over to him, looking around to make sure no one was around them. “What?!”

Shitty Hair handed Katsuki his phone, wordlessly. Katsuki looked down at the screen, biting back a smart-ass comment. Why the fuck

did he care about a text Kirishima got from Pinky?

**< 3 Mina: Hey, Babe!**

Gross.

**< 3 Mina: Hey, Babe! Can you keep an eye out for Ochako? She just left the dance club..."**

*Club? What the hell were they doing?*

**< 3 Mina: She looked upset, and she just left. She's on her way back to the school. Can you just text me when she gets there, so I know she made it back?**

Katsuki pushed the phone back into Shitty Hair's hands.

"What?" Katsuki grumbled, looking away from Kirishima's expectant gaze. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"Nothing," said Kirishima, holding up his hands in surrender. "Just thought you'd want to know."

He did. Of course, he did. If for no other reason than to scold the idiot for walking home on her own like a dumb-ass. Katsuki pushed himself off of the counter and headed toward the front door.

"Where are you going, Kacchan?" asked Deku.

"Mind your damn business, nerd," he spat out before jerking the door open.

"*Kacchan* just needs to take a walk," said Shitty Hair, jumping onto the couch and rejoining his classmates. "He took his loss hard."

The door slammed shut, cutting off Katsuki's volleyed back profanities.

Idiots.

All of them.

Katsuki flopped down on the bottom step and leaned back against the stairs. After she had frozen during the fight, he had decided that he just needed to get over his "not caring" façade- which, clearly, was not

the reality.

She was his friend.

Obviously.

Why else would he be waiting outside to make sure she got home safe?

At the end of the day, he settled on the fact that she was smart, tough, and she was kind- and she deserved people in her corner right now. And if she wanted him to be one of those people, it was no skin off his nose. Annoying and inconvenient at times, perhaps, but not so bad.

And despite his reputation, any time he saw someone climb a huge fucking mountain or claw themselves out of a deep pit, he respected the hell out of that, and he liked watching it happen. For tactical reasons, on some level, he liked being around people who pushed him to be better. And he believed tenacity inspired tenacity. There was once a time when he was not so amenable to that; his blustering, middle-school self thought he was the shit (well, he was the shit, but he was a shit who could still learn from the people around him).

He still blustered a lot.

But he wasn't quite as ignorant as he had been then, stupid enough to believe that he had nothing to learn from anyone.

Plus, he missed her stupid, loud laugh; he missed being annoyed by it when he was trying to study, and her stupid, distracting roundness- he missed that too. So, he waited on the porch to make sure that she was okay.

When he saw her eventually come out of the darkness, she was too far away to see her expression, to check her over, to assess. So he stood and walked down the path, casual but scowling.

"Please tell me what genius thought possessed you to think that walking home by yourself at 11 pm was a good idea?"

She looked up at him wearily. But she didn't say anything.

She had been wearing makeup, and for some reason- it struck him as odd. He wasn't sure why. He only noticed now because it had run and streaked down her face. He was pretty sure she didn't usually wear makeup. He hadn't noticed when he saw her before, so it must not be

a lot. Did she wear makeup before?

He couldn't remember.

"You could have..." the weak reprimand died on his lips suddenly, because while he had gotten used to many of her behaviors, her odd looks, and shifts in her voice, he wasn't prepared for her to flat out ignore him, to continue to walk forward, like she couldn't even see him, like she was going to walk right through him.

Was he fucking invisible? Rude!

"Oi," he barked, trying to get her attention. "What are you...?" She stopped right in front of him and let her head drop, her forehead pressing against the base of his throat, like it had suddenly become too heavy to hold up. Then her arms were wrapped around his torso, bunching up the fabric of his shirt in her hands. He froze for a moment, palms out, and arms slightly lifted, so they weren't touching the arms wrapped around him.

He stood like that for a minute, though it felt significantly longer.

What was she doing?

*This was new.*

Weird.

A small shudder shook her body as she gripped his shirt tighter in her fists and pulled herself closer to him. Now that she was well up in his space, he could hear her erratic breathing and her attempts to settle it, to match it to his.

Slowly, he dropped his arms down and rested one on her head, and the other lowered awkwardly somewhere in her upper back region before pressing tightly against her shoulder blade. She stood there for a moment, letting herself fall a little heavier into him now that she knew he wouldn't shove her away.

"Uraraka," he finally said, breaking the silence. "What happened?"

She let out a sad, half-sigh, half-laugh as she loosened her hold on him, but she didn't pull away entirely.

"Nothing happened." Her voice was sad and bitter.

"Bullshit."

Another laugh, bitter this time. She dropped her arms and stepped away from him. “No,” she said, shaking her head incredulously. “I mean it! Literally, *nothing* happened-I’m just...” she let out a frustrated growl and slipped past him before she settled onto the stairs. Katsuki stepped closer to her.

“What?” he pressed.

“I’m just too...I...” her gaze settled absently at the horizon in front of her, a perplexed look settling into her features as she stared out into the distance. “...Sometimes, I feel like whatever it is that’s broken inside of me can’t be fixed and that I’m going through all of this- all of this therapy, all of this work- all of this confronting my stupid feelings- and it won’t matter because I’ll never be...me...again.”

Katsuki stood wordlessly in front of her before sitting down beside her on the stairs with a sigh.

“So...something did happen?”

“No,” she said, her voice calmer and more direct, her eyes a little clearer. “I...it was crowded and loud, and I panicked when I couldn’t find Momo.”

*Ah. There it was.*

“I couldn’t find her, and every last bit of me was convinced someone had taken her.” She ran a hand through the short strands of brown hair and shook her head. “I know it’s dumb. People...people don’t just get snatched, except...” her voice cracked as she leaned into her hands and rubbed her forehead tiredly.

“Except,” offered Katsuki. “Sometimes, they do.”

“Yeah,” she breathed with a small nod. “Sometimes, they do.” She leaned back, her elbows resting on the step behind her. “Dr. Shoko says that I am supposed to retrain myself to believe that the world is safe, but we need heroes because the world isn’t safe. We are here at UA because the world isn’t safe. And trying to learn both of those things at the same time is...” she shivered and shook her head before looking over at him. “I’m sorry for jumping you,” she murmured, picking absently at her nailbed. “I just felt like... everything was spinning, and I needed it to stop.”

“Whatever,” he said with a shrug. “It doesn’t matter.” He surprisingly didn’t care. His bubble was, as a rule, big, but his rules were turning

out to be a lot less writ in stone when it came to her. "Did you text Pinky or Ponytail?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I texted them as soon as I got here."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "For the record, walking home at night by yourself is dumb no matter who you are."

She nodded. "I know." He raised an eyebrow, expecting more pushback, more defense. "I...I didn't want to ruin it for everyone else," she said, hugging her knees. "Mina was so excited- they all were-, and I didn't want to ruin it because I don't know how to have a good time anymore."

He got that; well, not really. He didn't understand caring about a night out with friends. He'd ruin that shit for an 8 pm bedtime. But he understood not wanting to cause a lot of fuss, to have other people worrying or picking or pawing at him- sometimes it was easier just to withdraw.

"So, you left."

She nodded, resting her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands. "I don't want to push my friends away," she said, her voice so small and quiet. "I really don't, and I don't want to keep turning people down either because I don't want people to think I'm not trying, that I don't appreciate being included."

Katsuki raked his fingers through his hair and stretched his legs out in front of him. "You know," he said with a scoff. "That's a hell of a lot of worrying about other people when you should be worrying about yourself."

She raised an eyebrow. "Easier said than done."

"Tch for you, not for me."

She laughed and nudged him slightly. "Yeah," she said. "Yeah, you're a selfish asshole."

"I am," he growled. "And I don't care for your tone, Uraraka. I don't do a damn thing that I don't want to."

She looked at him for a moment, confusion in her eyes like she wasn't quite sure what he had said; like she was wondering why the hell he was sitting out with her on the steps at night. Like he hadn't just told

her that he didn't do things he didn't want to do. He had told her they were friends; he didn't dole that shit out like candy.

"If you're gonna have friends, then have them," he said. "If you told Pinky that..."

"I know," she interrupted. "That's the problem. If I told her, she'd be great. She'd be supportive; she'd change the whole night for me. And...I don't want that, either."

"That's her choice," he said. "Not yours."

She let out a frustrated growl, and he laughed. "I'm trying," she said. "I'm trying. I just want..."

"You want everyone to be happy," he interrupted. "So, you smile and nod and say yes..."

"Yeah, I'm already an empty depressing Zombie," she said, but her tone was light. "No need to bring everyone else down with me. I don't want to be a bitch to people."

"Please," he said sarcastically, rolling his eyes and looking at her pointedly.

"You deserve it," she countered with a smirk. "Lucky you."

She was being facetious. He knew that. But still- she was right. She stood up and sighed, looking up at the sky. "All right," she said. "I think I'm gonna take the shortcut to my room. I'm peopled out."

"Short cut?" She wiggled her fingers at him by way of answer. "Right." He stood up and started to walk around to the side of the dorms. "Come on."

She narrowed her eyes at him as she moved to follow. "I can walk to the dorms alone."

"I know you can," he said. "I'm going to make sure your quirk doesn't fuck up and shoot you into the stratosphere."

She eyed him suspiciously, but she nodded. "Fair enough."

They walked together in silence, but he could feel the heaviness in her presence return on the short trip around Heights Alliance. She hugged herself anxiously and seemed to be tumbling inward on herself. She stopped when they reached the back of the dorm and pointed up at



the balcony above her. "This is me."

He nodded, looking down at her face, a mess from the running makeup, accentuating the dark shadows that existed perpetually on her face. "I..." her voice started, shaky and afraid. "I was afraid," she said, like it was a shameful confession. "It didn't feel like an exaggeration in my head." Her eyes were wide, tentative, and it made him a little nervous- like she was trying something out on him right now, and he didn't want to fuck this up. "I looked around, and suddenly, all of them were in danger, and I told myself that it was stupid, that she was fine, and then I thought..." she puffed out her cheeks and toed at the ground with frustration. "I thought if I had noticed that Tsu was missing sooner, then maybe...maybe everything would have been different."

He waited quietly, making sure that she was finished before he spoke. "It probably would have been," he said with a shrug. "I think that all the time." She looked up at him, brows knitted in confusion. "If I had been faster, or stronger, or smarter- then maybe the League wouldn't have gotten their hands on me, and then maybe All-Might, my fucking hero, wouldn't have gotten in the fight that ended his hero career."

It wasn't his first time voicing that guilt, but it was one of the first times it wasn't ripped painfully from his throat. It was the first time it was given willingly in sound mind.

"It's exhausting," she said. "Isn't it?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it is."

She didn't tell him it was not his fault- and he appreciated that because it wasn't like he didn't know that on a factual level. But the feeling didn't go away, no matter how true that was. He supposed it was a small percentage of what she felt. Still, he understood being filled with "what-ifs," with a heightened sense of how precarious and unforgiving the world could be.

Exhausting.

That was exactly what this was.

"So how long does it take to be fun again," she asked, with a small smirk, readying to activate her quirk on herself.

"I was never fun," he said with a scoff. "So, wouldn't know."

“Right,” she said with a shrug, brushing her hand against herself.  
“Good night, Katsuki.”

She made it a few feet before he grabbed hold of the toe of her shoe- his grip loose, but enough to keep her from floating away completely.

“Oi...” she peered down at him, at the anchor of his hand, floating her like a balloon. But she didn’t look upset by the touch. His ears burned, embarrassed in the way he only got in the rare times that he did something he wasn’t confident that he was able to pull off. “I think...I think you’re not...” he growled and shook his head, groping for words. “I hope you have fun again one day, Uraraka.”

She dangled there for a moment longer- her confusion chased away by a small smile that made his blush deepen. He looked away.

“Thanks, Katsuki.” He let go of her foot without another word, and she continued to float upward toward her balcony. He watched, knowing full well that she could make it there. She was so much more graceful now. She reached out and grabbed the edge of her balcony and maneuvered herself over onto it before releasing her quirk. He was about to walk away when her head poked back over, and she waved at him.

He rolled his eyes and jerked his head upward in response before walking back to the dorm.

###

Ochako knocked on Mina’s door and rubbed her hands together nervously, her heart pounding in her chest. She had already talked to Momo, apologized for worrying her, and tried her best to explain the situation without over-explaining that she had been afraid that she had been snatched up and trafficked.

But she also needed to talk to Mina.

She didn’t want to destroy every relationship beyond repair. “Oh, Ochako,” greeted Mina, a smile on her face. “How are you?!”

She didn’t look upset or put out with Ochako, which settled her nerves just a bit. “Can we talk?”

“Of course!”

Mina moved aside and made space for Ochako to come inside. “What’s up,” she asked before flopping back onto her bed. Ochako moved to sit beside her on the bed- an action she never would have thought twice about before but now seemed unnatural.

“I wanted to apologize for bailing.”

Mina’s eyes widened, and she gestured wildly. “Oh, don’t apologize, Ochako! It’s not...”

“No,” said Ochako, shaking her head. “I want to explain. I really did want...I mean, I was having fun. I was. But when I couldn’t find Momo, I panicked.” Mina looked at her, listening carefully, patiently, without judgment. “I thought of when Tsu went missing, and I freaked out a little.” She could see the clench of Mina’s jaw as she nodded. “And I didn’t want to ruin the night for anyone else so...” she trailed off with a shrug, not sure how to end.

“Ochako,” said Mina, turning to face her more fully on the bed. Ochako could see her friend fight the urge to hug her, and instead, she held out her hand to her. Ochako took it. “You could never ruin a night” Mina squeezed her hand lightly. “Ever. And I hope...” Mina looked down. “I hope next time, you feel like you can tell me something is uncomfortable for you because I would much rather have you around than not around.”

Ochako let her head drop. “I’m sorry.” Her voice broke. “I want to be better, so I can...”

“Ochako,” Mina dropped her own head, so her forehead was pressed to Ochako’s. “Don’t. Please. Don’t apologize. I love you. We all love you. You aren’t a chore.”

*“The best to learn the world is safe is to lean into the nurture of the relationships around you.”*

Ochako nodded. Dr. Shoko hadn’t been wrong yet, so maybe she wasn’t wrong about that. “Thank you, Mina.” Ochako raised her arms and draped them around Mina, awkward and bony, but it was nothing.

# He Hates Bad Days

## Chapter Summary

Thank you all sooo much for your kind words and comments. They make me feel so loved and make me want to write more and post more. The support has meant so much to me!

CW for this chapter: invasive memories, and nightmares

“See if you can hold it a little longer this time.”

Ochako closed her eyes and exhaled again. She was trying to expand the gravity field beyond the small two-foot radius she had plateaued at over the past two weeks. She was trying, but she was so tired.

Tired in a way that she couldn't ever recall being in her life. She had pulled plenty of all-nighters in her life. And before, when she was in that place, it had been hard to keep track of anything, but she was certain that she went several nights without sleep- and the sleep she did get was never deep.

But somehow, this tired she carried in her, felt infused into her bones- infused deep into her marrow.

This tired was different. This tired was stripping her bones raw- she had *felt* stronger before when she had been able to push down the pain, the weariness, and the hunger- it had given her an intoxicating sense of control.

Now that control was gone.

Now any time she tried to close her eyes, to concentrate, to quiet herself, to visualize the pull of gravity around her- her mind was immediately flooded.

Flooded with all the ways she had been forced to use her quirk in that places

...With all the ways she *couldn't* use it before in that place.

...With the intense disconnect she still felt with her quirk.

It had been out of her control for so long, a tool at the hands of others that she hardly even recognized anymore.

“Focus, Uraraka...”

And when his voice broke through into her consciousness, she was reminded of just how easily *he* could take it away too.

Just like they had.

It wasn't hers anymore, her quirk. Anyone could take it at any time.

“Uraraka, you need to focus just on the small area around you, not...”

“I'm trying,” she barked, her eyes flying open to level her teacher with a scolding glare, only to find Aizawa floating slowly up along with the rocks and dirt and leave and anything else not rooted to the ground.

“Dammit!”

She dropped them and let out an angry growl before kicking the ground.

“Control,” said Aizawa. “That's what we're focusing on. You already know you can do it, but you need to do it on purpose.”

She looked down at the ground, hot tears of frustration burning in her eyes. “I know it's frustrating, Uraraka, but this is normal when quirk evolution occurs. It's a battle to get it under control again...”

She sniffed quickly and wiped her tears away with the palm of her hand. “Is that what this is, Sensei?!” Her voice dropped to a low snarl. “Quirk *evolution* ?” He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“That's not what I meant...”

“Because it feels to me like a quirk defect,” she interrupted. She had made progress in so many ways, in so many places, but when it came to Aizawa, she couldn't seem to let her foot off the gas; given the opportunity, she always tried to start shit with him.

And she didn't know why. There was once a time when he was the last person she ever wanted mad at her.

And now she couldn't stop.

She just felt so much when she was around him- too raw and exposed.

He was the only one who had knew, really knew, what happened, and

she could tell every day in how he treated her.

He wasn't a man given to pity.

But he pitied her.

And it was driving her insane.

"...It feels like someone forcibly removed my quirk and changed it without my say-so." She barreled forward. She glared up at him through her tangled, dirty hair. "It feels like it's not even mine anymore!"

Aizawa looked down at her for a long moment, and she realized she was shaking, ready to snap, ready to scream, something on the tip of her tongue, begging to be spoken to her teacher (or yelled).

"You're doing well," he said, finally. "I know it doesn't feel like it, but you're making progress."

She closed her eyes, blinking free a few tears before she looked up at him. "I want to try again."

She didn't really want to.

But she had too.

She couldn't run; she had to go through the whole thing if she was going to learn who she was now. She would never get to know what was on the other side of all of this if she stopped now.

###

She was barely on her feet by the time she made it back to the dorms. She and Aizawa were supposed to wrap up two hours ago, but she was getting there, she was closer now, and she couldn't stop. And she had wanted to make sure that it wasn't a fluke; that it wasn't an accident, like so many times she had used her quirk, born of frantic fear and panic.

Then she wanted to do it again.

And again.

And if Aizawa was going to be treating her differently right now, different enough to take her out of her classes, different enough to put up with her treating him like crap, then she would take advantage of

it by extending their class by an hour or two.

Sensei "Just-focus-Uraraka" Aizawa...

Fine.

She was focusing.

So now...five vomit spells, two nose bleeds, a buzzing eardrum, and a not-so-well-hidden panic attack later, she was on her way back to the dorms in higher spirits than she had been in a long time, a small sense of self-ownership returning to her.

She opened the door to the dorm to find it relatively crowded compared to when she usually returned after her quirk class; several of her classmates were already eating dinner or just hanging out in front of the T.V.

"Uraraka, you're..." Deku! He would be excited to hear about it- he loved new quirk stuff. She moved toward him but stopped in her tracks when she saw his face crumple. " Oh god, are you okay?!"

She knew he didn't mean to say it so loud as he crossed the room to her, but he did, and suddenly she felt a little less excited as classmates turned to look at her, and she was suddenly deeply aware of her physical state.

"Is that your blood?" asked Iida, trailing closely behind.

"Yeah, but it's..."

"Do you need to see Recovery Girl?"

"No, I'm..."

"Have you eaten yet?" asked Tsu. "Usually, you're already back by the time combat ends."

Ochako's stomach flipped.

Usually, she was back.

Back before them. Back at the dorms while her classmates learned advance combat techniques.

Falling more and more behind.

While they were getting better.

“We went longer today,” she said, her voice small.

“Hmmm....” mused Iida. “Perhaps Aizawa should mark the time more diligently. Over-working yourself without proper nutrition is not healthy.”

She looked down at the ground to hide her tears- the crushing disappointment in her eyes- and she hated herself all over again because she had never in her life been this moody before. She was the opposite of moody. So, of course, her friends couldn’t keep up with her current state of neediness.

It wasn’t important, anyway.

“You’re right,” she said with a nod before stepping past them. “I’m... I’m going to go get cleaned up.” She walked out of the common room toward the stairs, catching a glimpse of herself in the window glass.

She did look bad.

Her face was dirty from the flying dust and debris- streaked with sweat and tears and smeared blood from when she hurried away her nose bleeds.

But it was certainly not as bad as Midoriya’s broken, mangled fingers that everyone thought was so badass. She sighed and started toward her room. Of course she looked a mess; she had worked her ass off today. She had earned the mess today, every drop of sweat and blood and vomit.

Suddenly her feet were taking her in another direction, away from her room toward another one; one that she never had thought would become so familiar and natural to her last year. She heard grumbling and swearing in response to her knock, and then the door jerked open with more force than was necessary. He scowled down at her, eyes going over her face scrutinizingly before he scoffed.

“Does the other guy look worse?” he snarked. She smirked up at him and, for some reason, found herself bouncing on her toes.

“I wanted to show you what I learned today?” It came out like a question, even though she had meant for it to be a declaration- she supposed she still wasn’t entirely comfortable with her standing in the blonde’s life for that.



“All right,” he said, stepping out of her way to let her in. She hurried past him and into the room, helping herself to a few of his books as she did. She heard the beginning of a protest as she touched his stuff without his permission, but she ignored it as she flopped onto the floor and arranged the three books in front of her in a semi-circle. Katsuki was standing in front of her, arms crossed and eyebrow cocked appraisingly.

“Step back,” she said, confidence buzzing in her hands. “I don’t want to float you.”

He prickedled at the order but obeyed. She exhaled slowly. She probably shouldn’t use her quirk again so soon, but she really wanted to show it off, and it would only be for a second. She pressed both hands to the ground in front of her.

Focus.

Focus.

It was her quirk.

In her hands.

In her body.

No one else's.

She opened her eyes and saw the books remained unmoved.

“Dammit,” she breathed. She looked up momentarily at Katsuki, who was looking at her impassively. She closed her eyes and tried again.

She tried to focus, but now she was thinking about Katsuki watching her- probably getting bored by the second, probably rolling his eyes with every second that passed that she couldn’t pull it off. She hadn’t wanted to struggle in front of anyone, but especially Katsuki.

Her focus was unraveling, and now she was too much outside of herself. She opened her eyes and let out a frustrated sigh, and shook her head.

“Maybe it was a fluke...” she whispered, not looking up at him, wishing she could disappear into the floor.

“Tch...don’t be a quitter,” he said. “You came here to show me something, so fucking show me.”

She nodded to him, to herself, before trying again. She pressed both hands back down against the floor.

She could do this.

She could.

This quirk belonged to her.

She had taken down a several feet of concrete. She had saved herself and 20 other people because it was *her* quirk.

She could do this.

She knew she could.

She concentrated on the push and pull- the atoms in the air around her, the gravity at play in and around everything around her. Her own gravitational field and the way it poured from her. She was the center point. Not just her fingers- but her.

When she opened her eyes, the books were floating and nothing else. She let out a delighted laugh and looked up expectantly at Katsuki, who stepped closer.

“Katsuki...” she tried to warn, but he ignored her, obviously knowing what to expect as he stepped into the radius of the gravitational field. He started floating immediately.

“Huh,” he mused as he floated above her and bonked gently against the ceiling. “Does the effect stay if I move outside of the radius?”

“I don’t know,” she said as he pressed against the ceiling of his dorm to guide himself out of the original sphere of her pull, but still remaining in zero gravity.

She let out a small laugh.

“Guess so!”

“Guess so,” he echoed. He did a few more experimental twists and turns before straightening himself out and pushing off the ceiling so his feet were pointing toward the ground. “Let me down.”

She grabbed him around the ankle and pulled him down so he was closer to the ground before she pressed her fingers together. He fell a few inches in front of her, stumbling slightly as he found his center

again.

“I...it’s only a small radius right now, and it’s not really an offensive quirk yet because I need to focus so hard to do it, but I...”

“It’s pretty fucking cool,” he said, and he looked like his brain was running a mile a minute with either possible scenarios for its use or ways to defend against it- both made her happy.

“Does it do all of that?” he asked, gesturing vaguely at her face.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Rude,” she exclaimed. “But yes, nose bleeds and a ringing in my ears because vomit isn’t enough.”

He scrunched his nose. “I thought it smelled gross in here.”

“Rude twice,” she said, throwing her hands up. “Fine, next time, I’ll keep my developments to myself and then whip them out during sparring.”

“Tch...that would be smarter than coming here to brag.”

She placed his books back where she found them. “You’re one to talk, Mr. Braggy Pants.”

“Does overuse of your quirk fry your brain too? Because that wasn’t clever.”

“Cut me some slack,” she said. “I’m exhausted and hungry...” Katsuki looked at her, surprised by something, but he didn’t say anything. “Thanks for letting me show off, though,” she said before heading to the door.

“Have you eaten today, Uraraka?”

She stopped in the door frame and looked back at him. “Uhh...no,” she said. “I was gonna go shower, and then I was going to go eat dinner.”

“What are you gonna eat?”

She scrunched up her nose and rubbed the back of her neck. “Uhh...I was thinking peanut butter toast.”

He rolled his eyes and opened his mouth like he was going to scold her, but then, in very un-Katsuki fashion- he seemed to think better of it. “It’s...better than nothing,” he muttered, though she could tell he

really wanted to berate her for eating junk.

“You can make me something yummier if you want,” she said, apparently enjoying testing her luck with him. She expected him to bluster and sputter and tell her to fuck off (though she knew, if she asked for food from him, that he wouldn’t say no).

“I’ll make extra stir fry,” was all he said.

She bit back her smile. “Hmmm...” she mused. “You do make a good stir fry.”

“Of course I do,” he snapped. “It’s the easiest fucking thing to make.”

“For you,” he said.

“Tch...do you want any or not?!”

She smiled and nodded enthusiastically at him. She *was* hungry- the quirk use had actually given her more of an appetite than she had had in a good while.

“I do,” she said. “Thanks!”

She closed the door behind her and hurried to her room, ready to get out of her disgusting clothes and into a shower.

###

Izuku watched curiously as Ochako walked into the common area, much cleaner and a little livelier than when she had left. She was wearing that hoodie he swears that he had seen before, just not on her, but he couldn't quite place it.

He watched as Ochako walked up to Kacchan. It wasn’t odd per se- she had never been as scared of him as everyone else, but she was lingering beside him by the stove. Making conversation. And someone who didn’t know Kacchan may have thought he looked annoyed, but Izuku knew better.

“Midoriya...”

He looked at Shoto, who was eating beside him. “Huh?”

“Why are you staring at Bakugo and Uraraka?”

“Oh,” he looked down at his plate. “No reason.”

Shoto shrugged in that way that was always helpful, taking Izuku at his word. Izuku looked up once more and almost choked on his dinner as Kacchan handed Ochako a bowl and filled it with a helping of his own stir fry.

“Midoriya!”

Shoto hit Izuku’s back a few times as he choked on his own dinner. “I’m fine,” he wheezed, taking a drink. “M’ fine.”

Kacchan wasn’t a bad person- not at all-, and he had never gone out of his way to be rude to Ochako, but cooking for her- that was...unheard of. Were they friends now? He knew that Ochako was having trouble connecting with him, Iida, and Tsu; he knew that.

He also knew that it was not from lack of trying on Ochako’s part.

He could feel it. She wanted to be herself with them. Izuku wanted to tell her that she didn’t need to try so hard- that she could be... whatever she needed to be, that she didn’t need to perform for them. But it was like there was some mental block there, some hurdle she had to constantly jump over just to be with them.

He hoped it wouldn’t be that way forever, but he also expected that no one wanted that hurdle gone as much as Ochako did. But it pained him so much. He would break every bone in his body if it meant helping her heal- helping her get past all of this hurt, helping her feel just a little bit better.

But, right now, she almost (almost) looked natural with Kacchan- well, as natural as she seemed to get right now. When Izuku looked up again, Kacchan was already heading back upstairs with his own bowl of food, and Ochako was walking toward them.

“Hey guys,” she greeted, sitting beside Iida.

“Uraraka,” he greeted, relieved. “You look much better!”

She nodded and took a bit of her food, and he swore he heard Iida gasp softly, and Tsu looked wide-eyed at the bowl of vegetables and meat. And he didn’t want to make a big deal of it, but he too felt a wave of emotion. She was eating.

She was eating food- real food. She was taking bites, not excited, whole-mouth bites like she once did, but it was more than just nibbles, more than just pushing her food around.

“Uraraka, how is your quirk developing?”

Uraraka looked up excitedly at Shoto, looking a little like she had before, like embers still lit beneath so much ash.

“Really well, actually,” she said, taking another excited bite. “After I eat a little, I’ll show you!” She paused, her chopsticks near her mouth, before pulling the sprout away from her lips slowly. “If you...if you want?”

“Of course we do, Uraraka,” Izuku said excitedly, bouncing slightly in his chair. “It’s exciting to see such rapid quirk evolution!”

She smiled and nodded, plopping her suspended bite into her mouth. Izuku had to force himself to continue eating, to not stare and grin like an idiot at his friend, and he was surprised to feel pressure on his hand under the table. He looked down slightly to see Shoto’s fingers briefly squeeze around his and then pull away.

###

Ochako never really talked to the tailed hero. She hadn’t avoided him on purpose or anything. He just didn’t talk a lot, and the opportunity to get to know him had never really presented itself.

But he was always good and honorable.

So maybe he wouldn’t freak out. Maybe he’d be a good person to ask for help from.

“Uraraka?”

She let out a surprised noise, forgetting that she was standing in front of Ojiro already. He looked up from his conversation with Tokoyami and Shoji, all of them stopping when they noticed her.

“Are you all right,” asked Tokoyami.

“Yes,” she said hurriedly. “Yeah, of course! I just...Ojiro...” and the martial arts hero looked at her, surprised. “Can...I was wondering if I could ask a favor of you?”

“Of course,” he said, sitting up slightly.

“I...you do yoga, right?”

He cocked his head to the side at her question. "I do, almost every night."

Ochako shuffled nervously and tucked her hair behind her ear. "Would you...do you think you could show me a few things?" She looked down, embarrassed, but she pushed forward. "I wouldn't need to interrupt often, but maybe once a week for a few minutes. My...my therapist thinks..." she was surprised at how simply it fell off of her tongue like it was common knowledge, but she couldn't find it in herself to be embarrassed. "...she thinks that it would be a good idea to do some calming movement. I...if it's too much to ask, then I totally understand."

"Not at all," he interrupted. "I'd love to show you some poses and techniques."

And- fuck it- of course, she almost starts crying again because that's all she does anymore. So, she nodded hurriedly, casting her eyes down.

"Thank you so much, Ojiro," she said, hurrying away before he could see. Poor boy was shy as it was. She didn't need to freak him out anymore than she already had with her tears.

She wasn't sad. She was grateful, but, for some reason, these days, everything came out in tears.

###

Eijiro usually got hungry between 1 to 2 am. Like clockwork, his sleeping body burned away his calories, and he stirred awake to a sharp pang of hunger in his stomach, one that he had long ago decided to stop ignoring. He couldn't fall back asleep until his post-midnight snack.

What was unusual- what was different- was the fact that a light was still on in the common room when he arrived- a small table lamp glowing by the couch. He looked around, searching for one of his classmates, but found the common area was empty. He went about making a quick piece of peanut butter and banana toast, and a cup of milk.

He had taken a few bites when he heard the stirring a few feet away. He set his snack aside and moved toward the couch, and peeked over the back where he found Uraraka passed out on top of a book, one arm dangling off the couch.

He considered, for a moment, waking her up. But he also knew that sleep had been hard to come by for her- Mina had told him that more than once while sneaking back to her room from his, that she could see her light on under her door or could hear her crying on the other side.

Eijiro breathed out and gently took the book out from under her cheek and set it on the coffee table before going to retrieve a blanket off the back of one of the chairs. The kind of quilts that Momo had stored all over the common room for optimal comfort. It was the kind of attention to detail that he didn't personally have but that he was grateful for now.

He would let her sleep. She was working her ass off, anyone could see that, and if what Bakugo told him was true, when he was inclined to explain his post-spar scratches and bruises, then Uraraka certainly wasn't coasting.

He carefully draped the blanket over her and moved to return to the kitchen and retrieve his snack. But he was stalled by the sound of a small whimper. He looked back down at her and saw her tight, furrowed brow, the way her hands fisted, almost instinctively in her sleep. Then she whispered something, soft and strained, not loud enough for him to understand. "Uraraka," he whispered, testing to see if she was awake. "Are...?"

Another pained moan slipped out, and he could see her shoulders tense under the blanket as her whole body went rigid and stiff. "Shit," he muttered, looking around the room and raking his hand through his hair.

When she let out a small yelp, and her body spasmed with little kicks, his heart clenched in his chest.

He didn't think about it often- he wasn't comfortable with rage in the way Bakugo was, and he couldn't really think about what had happened- what could have happened- to Uraraka without feeling rage, without feeling deeply murderous.

She was a good person.

One of the better people he had met in his life. And that was saying a lot given where he went to school. She deserved to be happy.

To sleep.



To be a hero.

Another loud, strangled cry, only slightly muffled into the couch cushion, made him wince. She was shaking.

She was afraid.

“Hey, Uraraka...” he nudged her shoulder gently. She shook her head, and a strangled protest escaped her lips. “Uraraka...” he spoke louder this time. “Wake up.”

Her breathing seemed more rapid and labored; her lashes were shining with tears that squeezed beneath her tight lids. He didn’t know it was possible to cry in your sleep.

“Ochako,” he said, crouching down by the couch and resting a hand on her shoulder and shaking her gently. At his touch, her body contracted and curled in on itself. “Wake up, Uraraka.” He kept his voice low and, he hoped, gentle. “Come on, girl. You’re okay.”

He rubbed small circles into her back, trying to stir her awake as gently as he could. But this time, at the brief contact, she flung her arm up, violently, her elbow hitting his chin. It wasn’t a particularly hard hit, but it was loud enough. Ochako’s eyes snapped open, and she jumped up onto her knees suddenly.

“Woa...” said Eijiro, holding up his hands from where he was now sitting on the floor beside her. “You’re good, Uraraka!” But her eyes were wide and trembling, jumping around the room frantically, searching for something, like a cornered animal.

“What the...what...?” the beginning of her questions kept stuttering to a stop, and then her eyes fell on him. She looked momentarily relieved and then mortified. “Oh shit, Kiri!” She covered her cheeks with her hands, her eyes falling briefly on his chin where she no doubt saw the evidence of her elbows contact. “Shit...” another hand went to her chest, over her heartbeat. “Did I hit you?”

Kirishima moved to sit beside her on the couch, one leg tucked under him so that he could turn toward her a little. “Don’t worry about that,” he said, attempting to keep his voice calm and casual. “Are you okay?”

Her eyes remained on his chin for a moment before she sank back into the couch and took a ragged breath.

"I fell asleep out here," she muttered, blinking rapidly to clear out the blurriness there.

"Yeah," he said. "Looked like you were studying for English."

She nodded and rested her forehead against her palm, moving it in harsh circles against her skin.

"I was just gonna let you sleep," he said. "But you were having a..." he struggled for the words that didn't make him sound like a weirdo who watched her sleep. "You seemed like you were distressed..."

She let out a small noise, somewhere between a laugh and a gasp for breath. "Yeah," she choked, her voice gravelly. "Yeah, that sounds right." She rested her chin and stared forward while Eijiro groped for any words, anything he could say to make Ochako stop shaking beside him.

"I'm sorry," she muttered.

"Hey, don't be," he said. "I shoulda got out of dodge. You should see Mina when I try to wake her up!"

She let out a small laugh. It was genuine enough but still, nothing like she used to laugh. He always liked telling jokes around Ochako because she could always be counted on for a good, affirming laugh.

He hated this for her. Hated that even in her sleep, Ochako didn't feel safe. Even in her sleep, she had to lash out to protect herself.

"Nightmares," he asked and immediately regretted it. But she didn't look embarrassed or upset, just tired.

"Yeah," she said.

He looked at her for another beat. "Are they bad?"

He was sure that was a stupid question- but it was the only one he had. He wanted her to know she could talk about it and it wouldn't freak him out- that she didn't have to pretend it was okay when it clearly wasn't. Even if she didn't want to talk about it- she didn't need to pretend.

She exhaled slowly and turned, so her temple was pressed against her knees as she faced him. "Yeah," she said, voice drenched in unflinching honesty. He nodded absently, almost to himself. "Some

are worse than others.”

“Are...” he didn’t know why he was asking her; he had no help to offer- maybe, she just wanted to talk. “Are they memories?”

“Mostly,” she said. “A mix of memories and other things- but yeah, mostly memories.”

He sat in silence for another moment. He wanted to be a hero, to be a good friend- he wanted to help her. “Is there anything I can do?” His question felt silly, but it was the only thing he knew to say. It was the only thing he knew to offer to her.

She seemed to be weighing the question for a minute, thinking on it, before a small smile tugged at her lips when she looked up at him. “Walk to my room?” she asked.

He nodded and jumped up to his feet and held his arm out to her chivalrously. “That I can do!”

She stood and linked her arm with his, and that alone made him feel a little better. But he couldn’t help but wonder if it was for her sake or for his- she must get the “what can I do to help” question at least five times a day. He wondered if she just made stuff up at any point to make the people around her feel good- like they were useful.

He hoped that wasn’t the case.

Eventually, he hoped she would know what to ask for and that she’d know that every last one of them would do anything for her.

###

Katsuki didn’t know why he was surprised, but he was. He was surprised to find that he didn’t hate spending time with her.

He liked sparring with her and training with her; he liked getting a front-row seat to her quirk development. But he also- secretly- liked that she trusted him. He was pretty confident in his ability to do just about anything, and he didn’t need any voice in his head telling him to be better because his voice was fucking loud enough as it was.

But when she came to his room after a hard day at therapy or a particularly great session with Aizawa to brag and show off, some part of him wanted to live up to the person she thought was careful enough to be trusted with that part of her.

He was loud and yelly- that didn't change- but he also knew how to pay attention when he needed to, and he was becoming an expert in Uraraka speak. So, he wasn't so upset (though he went through the effort of pretending to be upset) when she came to his room and just wanted to hang out. They weren't even studying- well, he was- she had her headphones in and was watching something on her computer.

And it annoyed him because he didn't just hang out-, and it annoyed him that he wanted to take a break from studying and watch a dumb show with his friend instead of working out. He told himself it was only because his current workout partner was tired- she hadn't slept well last night.

He could usually tell.

So...

"Move," he said, hitting the bottom of her foot lightly. She removed her ancient as hell headphones.

"Oh," she said, moving to sit up. "I'm sorry! I can go if..."

"I said move," he grumbled. "Not 'go.'"

"Oh," she smiled and scooted over from the center of his bed to the left side. He scooted onto the bed next to her, and she unhooked her headphones.

"Oh, what the fuck is this...?" he asked when his eyes fell on the screen.

She scowled up at him at his tone. "Hey," she said, swatting him lightly. "Don't judge me!"

"Oh, I'm judging you, big time! This show sets women back 100 years!"

She raised an eyebrow, but a playful smirk played on her lips. "Thanks for mansplaining the plight of women's progress to me."

"Pick something else," he said. "I'm not watching this shit in my room!"

"Give it time, Katsuki!"

His scowl deepened. "No!"

"It's just a dating show!"

"It's a cattle drive, is what it is," he shot back.

But she remained equally resolute. "You're just worried I'll beat you at the Bachelor!"

"The fuck are you talking about?!" She smirked and held out her phone to him, where a list of names spread over 12 weeks looked up at him. "Am I supposed to know these people?"

She sighed and rolled her eyes- like he *was* the idiot. "It's my bracket!"

"Eh?"

"My bracket," she repeated. "Me and my mom and a few of my cousins do brackets every year."

"Every year?!"

She nodded. "And I need to finalize mine. I'm behind, so either help me or keep it down!"

He growled low and threatening, but she didn't flinch because, well, she does speak Bakugo- maybe not fluently yet, but she was on her way. "Fine," he grumbled, snatching away her paper. "Just to make sure your stupid fucking bracket is accurate."

He didn't stop grouching the whole time, but he kept it on a razor-thin edge because she deserved something normal and stupid in her schedule. Between therapy, lessons with Aizawa, training with him, and sprinting to make up for lost time, it was rare to see her do something that she just wanted to do.

For no reason other than that she wanted to do it.

And if she wanted to do it in his room- well- that was okay too, he supposed.

At least for today.

####

"I'm sorry, Ojiro," she sighed, struggling to regain her balance. "I don't know why this is so hard."

"It's your first try," he said, sitting beside her, a careful, shy smile on

his face. She hadn't been prepared for how excited he had been to teach her. He had an extra yoga mat that he rolled out on the lawn behind the dorms and eagerly invited her to use. And you really can't fail at yoga."

She nodded.

"I didn't expect breathing to be so...hard."

Ojiro nodded. "Yeah...we take our breath for granted all the time, so when we try and focus on it, the depth, the placement- it's harder than we think." She nodded and smiled at the boy; he had a quiet air about him that she found very calming.

He flew under the radar, but five minutes into their time together, she was struck by the certainty that he would be a good hero.

He was good.

He was reliable.

People were good. And she had to stomp out the flames of shame and guilt when she was with someone like him. It wasn't fair. Ojiro didn't seem like someone who would judge her for anything, and that almost made it worse. She had a hard time seeing herself as a hero, anyway. It made it worse when she started comparing herself to her classmates.

"You're a really good teacher, Ojiro," she said. "Thank you for helping me."

He blushed and looked away briefly and then back to her. "Same time next week?" He looked like he was trying not to look too excited.

"Yeah," she said, with a nod. "Yeah! Maybe I can hold a pose and breathe at the same time, instead of just picking one."

He smiled and nodded eagerly.

"I think you will, Uraraka!"

And she believed him.

###

Katsuki knew that it was normal. From all that he had read, he knew it was to be expected, but still- it was hard to watch.

It was hard to see her come to class and know it was a bad day for her.

And today, she came in right before the bell. She did that to make sure she didn't have to talk to people. She looked almost the same, but there was something slightly off. The dark shadows under her eyes were a little more pronounced, her cheeks were chapped and red (not pink, red) from moisture, and she held herself tight at her desk as if she was trying to still her shaking body.

Katsuki watched her from the corner of his eye from where he sat a few desks back. She didn't search out anyone's gaze but stared forward, her motions jerky and abrupt as she prepared herself for class. She grabbed her pens and pencils, and then when she reached into her bag and pulled out her binder, he saw the sleeve of a black hoodie, his hoodie, hang out of the flap. He briefly wondered if she was cold today or if she always had it on her, in case she needed it. Or did she only have it on her when she had bad days?

He averted his gaze before the inexplicable blush tinged the tips of his ears.

He knew she would likely go back to her room instead of hanging out in the common room for dinner. Lately, she had been spending more time with her friends, studying, eating, or joining them for movie night. That was good. But she would still retreat on bad days and usually skip meals, falling back onto habits that weren't distant enough to be considered old yet. So he started planning what he would make for dinner, knowing she would likely want something light and bland today.

Well, she probably wouldn't want anything today, but she wouldn't say no if he made it. She was still too polite for that- even in her current state.

So, when he brought a bowl of rice and vegetables to her room, she didn't look surprised. She didn't even fight him as he handed the bowl out to her.

"Eat this."

It was all he said before he turned to leave her alone. He wouldn't grudge her alone time. He liked to be alone for far less. But she owed it to herself to meet her halfway. But when he turned to leave- he was stalled by her hand, fisting the back of his shirt, holding him in place.

He turned to look over his shoulder at her, bowl in one hand, his shirt in the other, her gaze at the floor. "Need something?"

She nodded and stepped back from the door frame and looked inside wordlessly. Maybe she didn't want to be alone. He should study; he really should, but it didn't seem particularly pressing all of a sudden. He crossed into her sparsely decorated room, his eyes scanning the space. He hadn't actually been inside her room before. She always came to his room (or barged into his room).

It was simple. Before he would've imagined something a little more pink, a little more feminine and cheery, but it was decidedly green, with no substantial decorations except for a star chart above her bed. He supposed something about that made sense, too, though. She was never particularly flashy- even before.

He stood for a moment in her room, waiting to see where she invited him. She crossed to her bed, balancing her chopsticks on the bowl, and sat down, scooting to the far side until she was pressed against the wall. She looked up and waved him over. He sat down on the edge of her bed, still wordless, before he sat back against the headboard, one leg draped off the mattress, firmly planted on the ground.

She still hadn't said anything. She certainly didn't seem to be in a mood to talk or eat. Her laptop was open at the edges of the bed, the beginnings of a paper blinking at him on the screen.

"Is that for legal and ethics?" he asked.

She nodded, poking at her food with her chopsticks. "Yeah," she said. "I'm comparing a couple of the court cases with a few from the States."

He nodded and looked over at her, now she was closer, and he could see the heavy droop of her eyes, her shaky hands around her chopsticks, and the slump of her shoulders. "Bad day?"

Her gaze remained locked on her vegetables for a moment before nodding slowly. "Bad night," she amended.

He nodded. He didn't press, but he also didn't say anything. He just looked at her, holding her gaze, letting her know she could talk more if she wanted to. She picked at her food wordlessly for a moment, apparently seeing if she could get the smallest possible bite between her chopsticks.



It was annoying as hell.

"I'm sad," she finally said. A simple declaration, but it seemed to take all of her effort to say it, to admit it. "I'm sad because I had a good day yesterday. I laughed, I ate, and I felt a little like me."

That didn't sound so bad. He had thought so too, which is why it had been even harder to see her drag herself into class like a corpse.

"Like...the old me," she added. "And when I went to bed last night, I thought..." she clenched a hand in her lap, and he could see the tense press of each finger into her palm like she was counting down. "I thought, what if I don't have a nightmare tonight? And what if I have a good day again tomorrow." He sat perfectly still, perfectly quiet- he didn't want to interrupt. "And then, maybe I'll have another, and another and another. And I thought, for a second before I went to bed, what if the worst is over.... maybe I can be me again." She shook her head, and a small shudder went through her body. "It's dumb," she said. "I know. Like I knew when I thought it that it was dumb- that it wasn't going to happen. But I just...I hoped maybe it was."

She turned to look at him again and seemed almost surprised to see him looking at her still, as if she had expected him to get bored. "And then I was just sad," she continued. "I felt like shit when I woke up, and I was sad because...what if..." her voice broke and tears trembled on the edge of her eyes, her brow furrowing deeply as if she wasn't sure how to even voice the question, like she was afraid of it. "What if...What if this is it?" He hoped he wasn't supposed to answer that because he had no fucking idea what to say- and he couldn't bring himself to lie to her. "What if every day is one step forward and three steps back?" She was looked straight up at him now, and it was his turn to fight the urge to look away because, even if it was rhetorical, even if she didn't expect a direct answer from him, he wanted to answer. He wanted to give her answers he didn't have.

He wasn't a liar, but, dammit, he wanted to lie so she could have a fucking break from the exhaustion in her eyes. "What if this is my life now? What if every day is just me, fighting my ass off for one good day? Sometimes..."

She choked slightly on a hiccup of breath, as if she surprised herself by whatever she was thinking. "Sometimes I miss it..." she did look away from him this time, her brow furrowing in confusion like she was ashamed and surprised by her own words. "I miss when I had to fight tooth and nail to stay alive- to not die." She blinked furiously,

releasing her tears. “God, that’s so screwed up to say, but it just felt...” she trailed off, groping for words, for something to soften what really didn’t need to be softened for Katsuki’s sake.

He thought she knew that by now.

“Simpler,” he offered with a nod. “I get that.” He looked at her and shook his head. “I mean not in the same way that you do, but...”

“No,” she interrupted and wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. “You do.” She nodded. “You get it. It’s...it’s what makes you so good at what you do.” He knows it’s not the point- she doesn’t even say it as a compliment- there’s no attempt at flattery- it’s like stating a fact, and somehow that made it even better. “Your goals are clarifying for you in a way that simplifies everything else.” She shook her head. “I was never like that...”

“Tch...bullshit.” She blinked up at him, confused and clearly awaiting more explanation. He rolled his eyes and resisted the urge to flick her in the forehead. “You dropped a stadium on my head, and then you ran yourself into the dirt- you’ve always had that in you.”

“I guess,” she said.

“And you used it,” he said. “You used it to stay alive, and I’m guessing it’s hard to go from *that* to having to read fucking Romeo and Juliet, so...yeah...it makes sense to me that some part of you would want to fucking stay in that hole. It’s not necessarily easy, but the goal was probably clear.”

She held his ruby gaze for a moment-searching for something, and he hoped he wasn’t supposed to know what because he had no idea.

“But I can’t,” she said tentatively, almost like she was answering a question he had asked like she was reminding herself. “Stay there.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “Some people probably can, but I don’t think you’d be happy there forever.”

She nodded, slowly, considering his words before looking back down at her bowl and taking a bigger piece in her chopsticks before suddenly turning back to him.

“Do you...do you think I’ll be happy again?” She asked the question almost curiously- like she didn’t know the answer herself and was inviting him to speculate with her as if they were talking about

whether or not it was going to rain tomorrow.

He let out a weighted breath and raked his hands through his hair. They *must* be friends because everything in him wanted to lie to her, to say “of course” (because if the answer to that question wasn’t “yes,” then the world could go fuck itself as far as Katsuki was concerned).

But he couldn’t make himself say it.

Because he had only *just* started to read about trauma and PTSD and how it fucking wrecks people- tough, strong, people; the most badass, highly-trained heroes and soldiers; all of them get seriously fucked over by trauma, and it sucked. And she wasn’t asking if she’d have a good day again or laugh at a joke.

She was asking if she would be okay again- a low fucking bar for someone who...well...someone even he couldn’t help but want good things for. She was asking if she would feel base-level okay again.

“Fuck,” he said, not angry, he hoped. “I don’t know, Ochako.” He saw her eyebrow hitch slightly, no doubt at his unconscious choice to use her given name, something she did a lot more often than he did. She looked at him, a small, tired smile on her lips, and she nodded. And he was glad he didn’t lie because he was sure she’d know if he had. “But...” He couldn’t lie to her, but he could be more honest than he normally would be. “Fuck...I sure as fuck hope so.”

And he was glad he finished that thought instead of chickening out like a coward because her eyes lit up, and her smile grew like it was the best thing he could have said before she sunk back against the headboard and, finally, took a bite of her food.

“Gonna stop playing with that now,” he snorted, motioning toward her bowl.

“Yeah...yeah...” she muttered, plopping a big bite into her mouth.

He scrunched up his nose in disgust. “Don’t talk with your mouth full!”

“I was raised on a farm,” she said. “What do you want from me?!”

He rolled his eyes but didn’t comment further on her eating patterns. Rather he opted to reach for her laptop. He bit his tongue more often than he normally would when it came to her eating because even if it wasn’t what he would call healthy yet, it was better than it had been.

And he could tell her relationship to food was precarious at best.

“Hey,” she protested through a mouthful of rice when he pulled her laptop into his lap. “That’s mine!”

“No shit, Sherlock,” he said. “I’m picking the show today, none of your fucking roses and alcohol!”

“Please,” she said. “You’re just saying that because you know we’re caught up!”

“What-fucking-ever,” he muttered, searching for a happy medium between them- mentally fielding any for sensitive subject matter.

“Oh, you’re such a revisionist,” she scolded, pointing her chopsticks at him aggressively. “When it ended on the last rose cliffhanger, you screamed at my laptop!”

“Shut up,” he said. “I did not! You take that back!”

She laughed and nestled more comfortably into her pillow so she could look at the screen on his lap.

“Whatever you say, Katsuki,” she said, patting his shoulder indulgently. She looked at the screen and nodded. “Start your show. I’ll decide if it’s better than The Bachelor.”

He hit play and leaned back carefully into her headboard.

She ate about half of her bowl before she set it aside, only for him to take it and finish off the rest. If she found the action odd- she didn’t comment. She asked the occasional question about characters and plot points of the sci-fi show, only to be quieted when he told her to pay attention.

About two episodes in, she had moved closer to the screen and sunk lower onto the bed, somehow, her shoulder ended up wedged against him, and her head rested slightly against his ribs.

And fuck it- he wasn’t gonna tell her to shove off- though he definitely should. Shitty Hair got slapped for less. But, he supposed, no one was around to gawk at him- so other friends wouldn’t think they could get touchy just because he was making an exception for her.

Not that this was particularly touchy-feely- her hands were tucked into the pockets of her hoody, and they were parallel from the waist

down, just with a slight bend in her upper body- just so she could see the screen. It was in his lap, after all.

It wasn't like they were fucking cuddling or anything!

He was watching a manly, sci-fi show with a friend who had a bad fucking day (like a legit bad day, not a spilled-coffee-on-my-last-clean-shirt kinda day). So, he didn't move, and he let her lay closer to him because they weren't cuddling. And he just ignored the fact that if she wanted to cuddle- if that would make her happy right now-he would definitely let her.

# A Better Hero

## Chapter Summary

The media jackals strike again in this chapter, but this time Ochako isn't alone.

\*CW Panic attack, memories of assault (nothing graphic or long- it's one sentence of her remembering a sensation)

Izuku had wondered- anxiously, fearfully- about when it would happen. He wanted to believe that it never would happen. Generally, Izuku believed in the basic goodness of people. Even though he wanted to be a hero, even though he knew how shitty the world could be, he still believed that people could be better.

That most people, when faced with the choice of what was right and wrong, would choose to do the right thing.

And he needed- *needed*- the world to be good in this way for Ochako because she deserved to be protected. People needed to do their job when it came to this.

And they hadn't, and that was why he felt mind-numbing, blind anger that hit him like a freight train when he looked down at his phone, dinging with the latest, breaking hero news. He read the headline briefly- non-committedly as he often did- only to do a double-take at the bold, flashing headline.

### Breaking News:

*“Brutal underground human trafficking syndicate uncovered with an exclusive interview with one of the victims.”*

Izuku's heart slammed inside his chest. No...no...no...

*“The investigation is ongoing in this heinous crime, where quirked individuals were targeted and forced to participate in combat to the death...”*

Shit...Shit...Shit...

“Izuku?!”

He could hear Shoto's voice, maybe even feel his hands on his

shoulders, but his body was buzzing with something strange and unfamiliar.

*“...One of the victims has come forward in an exclusive interview, speaking out for the first time about the nightmarish crimes, inhumane treatments, starvation, physical torture, and sexual exploitation...”*

Shoto was yelling at him now. Izuku dropped his hand, so he wasn't looking at the screen any longer and looked up at the feeling of Shoto's hand on his face, tugging his gaze upward.

“What is it?” he asked, his voice soft and calming. Izuku didn't even know he was crying until Shoto thumbed away tears with his cold hand.

“Izuku,” he said. “Look at me.”

Izuku obeyed, and while rage still trembled inside of him, the dual-colored eyes served to calm it enough for him to take a breath, to reel in the roiling power inside of him, giving him enough of a presence of mind to see that he was surrounded by worried classmates.

“It's uh...”

He wanted to protect her- to preserve her privacy as much as he could. But he doesn't know how. He was supposed to be a hero, and he can't protect her from this.

“I'm sorry,” said Izuku, squeezing Shoto's shoulder. “I...I have to go... I'll text you soon. I promise.”

Shoto didn't argue with him, there is concern in his eyes, but he didn't try to stop Izuku when he turns and runs back toward homeroom. He blew through the door to their homeroom class, where he found Aizawa.

Izuku didn't have any preambles or pleasantries to offer him.

“I thought the investigation was confidential,” he barked. Aizawa looked at him, tired and confused and uncertain.

“What are you talking about?”

Izuku crossed toward Aizawa's desk and angrily shoved his phone into his teacher's face- taking (attempting) deep calming breathes thought it did little to hush the rapid percussion of his first heart or the

blinding tears stinging his eyes.

Aizawa's face changed as his eyes scanned the screen- from exhausted and bored to exhausted and sad and resigned. And if Izuku had been holding on to any hope that the headline wasn't right- that it was sensationalized for drama, that this "victim" wasn't made up for clicks- it went away when he saw the look in Aizawa's eyes.

And Izuku's heart broke all over again- like it had when she had gone missing. He knew it had been bad. He had known that, of course. It had been agonizing to watch her in those early days when she first came back. He went to bed, afraid that she wouldn't be there in the morning. He had known whatever had happened to her had been bad.

And now to know just how bad- to have even the barest idea of how bad it was- that Ochako- his Ochako- his sweet, good, bad-ass, Mochi-loving Ochako had been through...it was too much.

And now, everyone was going to know.

"It was supposed to be," whispered Aizawa. "But it doesn't seem to be anymore."

"Does it..." Izuku swallowed the harsh sob in his throat. "Does it mention her?"

Aizawa shook his head. "Not by name, but..."

"Everyone will know," finished Izuku. Of course, they would. She had crawled out of that hole on live T.V. He felt like his heart was being crushed. "Everyone will know what happened to her."

Aizawa slowly handed Izuku back his phone. Izuku knew his teacher fairly well. Izuku paid attention to heroes; it was what he did. And while to the casual viewer, Aizawa may still look unaffected and apathetic- Izuku could see the war in his eyes.

"Yes," his teacher answered without any words of comfort.

It was a simple, horrible, honest answer. "She lost so much already," breathed Izuku. "She shouldn't have to have it on display for the media to chew at like a fucking toy."

Izuku could see the slight tense of Aizawa's jaw, the thick swallow before he spoke. "No," he said. "No, she shouldn't."



Izuku felt like he was sinking, grasping, desperate for something- for any way to protect her. “She’s been doing so well...” it sounded childish and needy, but it was all he could manage before his head dropped and sobs shook his body.

Aizawa stood by, not awkward, but almost in solidarity.

Izuku didn’t notice at first when the arms- familiar arms- wrapped around him. He heard voices over his own screaming grief, and then he felt himself being led out of the classroom, past still-worried classmates. But Shoto (he knew it was Shoto) continued to walk him down the hall.

He doesn’t say much- Shoto rarely trusted himself enough to talk- but he was always there.

Then and now.

Shoto always seemed to show up when he needed him. And Izuku really did need him.

Then and now.

###

Eijiro had never known Bakugo to skip class.

Ever.

Even one that the blonde deemed unnecessary, like homeroom.

So he did send Bakugo quick text, just to check on him, just to make sure he wasn’t welded to a building or trapped in debris of his own making. He didn’t get an answer all class. But after class, when Mina came to him, clearly upset and shaking, and told him what was going on, told him what had everyone in their class on edge, Eijiro knew where his bro was.

He was exactly where he needed to be.

###

Ochako was on the bus back to campus from Dr. Shoko’s office when she casually looked down at her phone. She wasn’t looking, but it was one of the first things that showed up on her Twitter feed.

Hell- #quirkfightclub was trending.

And, almost immediately, she felt that familiar sensation wash over her, the one that was always waiting and lurking for its chance. The one she had been doing so much work to recognize before it could take control of her. The one she had been teaching herself to look out for so that she could breathe, redirect her thoughts, and ground herself in her body and in the physical world around her before it washed her away completely.

But it came so fast she didn't have time to latch onto anything before she felt like she was a tiny boat in a storm- capsizing over and over again under the force of some merciless wave that would not let her right herself no matter how hard she beat back against it.

Her thumb moved without her say-so, scrolling through the stories; she an impartial passenger, watching almost with cold detachments. Her body reacting the same way it had done the third time she had been shoved violently into a bed; when the pain of her body being torn apart was too much for her to hold onto.

In those moments, in beds and in the dome, she had just left her body altogether.

Created a safe distance between herself and the physical sensations assaulting her.

And she could feel herself doing that now.

Her eyes roved over the screen. She wondered which victim had spoken up. They had kept their name anonymous, but from what she was reading, their account was accurate. She wondered why they had spoken up. Up until now, she had kept herself relatively detached from the ongoing investigation. She barely had enough energy to get through her day-to-day, let alone be worried about whether or not this was still happening in other places.

Whether or not there were other people like her.

It was unheroic, sure. But she couldn't think about it.

Did that make her selfish?

Maybe the victim who spoke up was dissatisfied with the pace of the investigation. Maybe the victim who spoke up cared more that this could still be happening. Maybe they were more heroic than her.

She wasn't angry at them, whoever they were.

She found, when she searched herself, she wasn't angry at anyone.

She wasn't anything.

She wasn't.

And it was almost like a sigh of relief, like returning to something comfortable and familiar. She had been so tired lately, having to feel everything.

But this... this vast nothingness... this was so much easier.

**@Dogsballs32171: *These are crisis actors! Do you think something big would be undetected for months without someone escaping?***

**@KK23: *I remember this! The footage of the escape was badass!***

Below that tweet, Ochako saw a video. She didn't need to click on it- she saw her own face, bloodied and snarling and grainy. She had never actually watched the footage. Living it had been humiliating enough. She didn't need to see herself lose her shit on camera.

**@Notyoursafeplace9301: *Yeahh did u watch all the footage? That chick is batshit crazy!***

**@Rei4u42: *Shut up, dude! This is serious, did you read the story?***

And on.

And on.

Retweets from pro-heroes with thousands and thousands of likes. She wondered that no one had any idea that this was coming. Had people known? Did they just not care to warn her?

Was she expected to find out this way?

Investigation was still ongoing- the article said- what did that mean?

She couldn't feel anything- the familiar coldness swept up her legs and over her arms and over her face- a coating of protective ice.

Her legs stood mechanically when the bus stopped.

*Everyone would know.*

Everyone would know that she wasn't a hero, she thought as she made her way down the long bus and stepped down onto the street.

It didn't matter that she was floating outside of herself- it didn't matter that she wasn't even aware of what, or why, she was moving. Her body knew this walk- it was muscle memory by now. Like so many things- like laughing, like smiling, like going through the motions of being a hero when she knew- knew in her heart- that she wasn't one.

And now everyone would know it too.

She stepped off of the train and oriented herself toward the school, the street that would take her there. The numbness was spreading, intensifying with her every step. And she was letting it. She would welcome it at this point.

She needed it.

This- *all of this* - was too much work.

It reached up her ribs, frozen tendrils crawling upward to reach and grasp toward her heart. And she didn't have the strength to stop it. She was just so tired.

"Oi..."

Her eyes jerked up, taking in her surroundings for the first time. She was close to the school, on a sidewalk that she knew well by now. She looked at him, confused for a moment as he stood up from the bench at the stop.

He was here.

Why was he here?

She looked around confused and disoriented, trying to make sense of her surroundings while she was actively removing herself from them, a dull roar in her ears and a throbbing ache behind her eyes. He took a tentative step toward her, eyes moving over her face before settling into a resigned, stubborn frown.

He knew.

He knew that she knew.

He walked toward her, and her body- almost instinctively- began to

retreat, to step away, to protect herself- like she would have done months ago.

Like she had done in that hospital bed.

But something in her chest jumped when Katsuki stopped in front of her- keeping her heart just out of reach of the icy vines threatening to take her over completely, to choke whatever life remained in her chest.

*You saved yourself.*

The words stopped the clawing hungry cold just before it filled her completely, sparing a last stubborn inch of herself.

He raised a hand, slowly, in deliberate and obvious motions, giving her a chance to step back- to pull away- before his warm palm found her face and guided her gaze back up to his. He was close- closer than he had ever been outside of sparring with her and that one time she dated hug him.

She didn't step away or toward.

She was feeling...

*Not* frozen.

She was...

Embarrassed.

Naked.

Vulnerable.

Afraid.

Hurt.

Angry.

Irate.

Bratty.

Petulant.

Resentful.

She wasn't frozen.

That- all of that- wasn't nothing.

She wasn't feeling nothing. She was feeling so many things. She was feeling everything. And she wondered why- so suddenly- so close to that blessed, numbing escape- her body let out a sigh- releasing it all at once.

Her knees buckled at the onslaught of sensation- bracing for the pain that she knew was coming- but Katsuki's free hand grasped her forearm tight, and he stepped closer, easily steadying her weight against him.

Solid.

Safe.

*You're with me, so you're safe.*

And her body unraveled inch by painful inch, and instead of recoiling from the surge of emotions. She stood still and let it fall over her, trying to breathe, trying to focus on her feet rooted on the ground, trying to focus on the sensation of Katsuki's fingers clasped around her arm, to the sound of his beating heart under ear- just loud enough to be heard over the howl of her own heart.

But there was so much, and it was all at once. She wanted to protect herself but didn't know how- everything was too much, and nothing was too much.

So, she breathed and focused on Katsuki's heartbeat, on the warmth of his palm on her cheek.

"What do you need from me?" The question rumbled deep in his chest under her ear.

"Did...did you see it?"

She knew the answer to that question, but for some reason, she needed to hear it- the hand on her forearm moved down to her wrist and clasped it tightly. "I saw there was a fucking news story, I saw the headline..."

Breathe.

Listen.

She started to shake, trying to capture back control of her body. He knew. They knew- it was a bell that couldn't be unrung.

This was her life now. It was out there for everyone.

Her heartbeat painfully in her chest.

"I...I..." she pulled away slightly, and her hand found his forearm, trying to regain her posture, but she couldn't seem to catch a good gulp of breath. And it must have been a few seconds before she noticed that oxygen wasn't getting to her brain because she, quite suddenly, felt a wave of dizziness. She brought her other hand to her chest and tried to grasp, to reach, to gulp, but it was like the air around them had been siphoned out of whatever bubble she was in.

"I...I can't breathe..."

Forever. Any hope she had that this would go away was gone now. It- all of her worst, painful and degrading moments- was out there for everyone to speculate on, to question, to poke at, to wonder about. People would be afraid of her...would pity her...be embarrassed for her... she wasn't sure which one was worse.

"Ochako..."

She could hear his voice at the edge of her consciousness.

"I...oh god..." she stuttered, clutching at her chest hard, her nails digging through her shirt, tugging, trying to relieve the pressure in her chest and in her lungs. "It..."

She couldn't breathe.

She couldn't breathe.

She felt like she was drowning.

Like she was going to die.

Like she had clawed her way out of that hole to die right here on the street.

"Ochako." His voice was firm with a slight edge- trying to control his own tone. "Can I help you move off of the sidewalk?"

She didn't respond, but she didn't fight- she couldn't fight- she felt like she was going to die as he led her off the street and into the soft grass.

"Fuck..." she gasped, her eyes blinding with hot panicked tears. "I... I..."

"Okay..." She doubled over against him. "I know this hurts, Ochako."

She let out a pathetic whimper and pressed her forehead into his sternum as she doubled over at the waist, clawing at her own neck as if she could open it with her nails and let the air in. "Hey," he said. "Hey...hey..." he grabbed her wrist and tugged her clawing paws away from her neck, and holding them firm in his hand. "This is going to pass. This will go away." She felt dizzy. "You aren't dying." She sobbed, strangled and panicked, and shattered. "The air is here," he said, firm and certain. "I promise you. It hasn't gone anywhere. So just give it time." He pressed his thumb into her palm, hard and firm. "Do you feel that?" She did. She nodded hurriedly. "Good." He moved his thumb in consistent small circles around her palm- his callouses blazing a soothing path over her skin.

She focused on the sensation- trying to breathe in time with the circular movement of his thumb against her palm.

Bringing her back to her body.

Slowly, the air came easier- the breathing came more fully- filling her lungs and chasing out the doom and the panic that had been gathering there.

She breathed in.

*Out.*

*In.*

*Out.*

*Expand.*

*Contract.*

*Fill.*

*Empty.*

*Nothing.*



*Something .*

She wasn't sure how long they stood there, but at some point, her exhausted, trembling body, strained from panic and pain, was sapped of every last bit of energy. "I...I..." She tried to right herself- to straighten herself and stand but as soon as she did, she felt all of her blood plummet down to her feet and her body crumbled beneath her like a building collapsing in on itself.

###

He knew it was coming, even with her breathing under control. She was a ghostly pallor- damn-near anemic looking- eyes glassy and body shuddering. And she went down like a fucking lamp.

He caught her easily- barely having to compensate for her added weight. He walked the short distance to the perimeter of UA's gates before he sunk down to the ground against the wall- shifting so that her head was pillowed on his thigh as she lay beside him.

No reason to stir her awake.

She'd come to on her own soon.

He knew how fucking hard she went at the Sport's Festival to get her whole-ass body to give out-, and if that anxiety attack had been the equivalent of all of that in the span of two minutes- he didn't even want to think about the concentrated toll it took on her mind and body.

So, she could rest for a bit.

Even if it likely wasn't restful, but they would take what they could.

He rested his head against the wall behind him and closed his eyes- ignoring the distant buzzing. Kirishima was probably wondering where he was. But if fucking Deku could skip out on class to do his fucking hero shit, so could Katsuki.

A thought first-year Katsuki would have balked at, but- well- fuck that guy.

Katsuki sighed and turned his face up to catch the last bit of sun

before it disappeared behind the trees, one of his hands falling absently to the crown of her head. She still kept her hair short, but it was longer than it had been in a while, wavy wisps that curled around her ears. He watched her face carefully- still a little pinched- sighs of distress still escaping her lips.

But still resting.

Which was more than he could have hoped for her today. This fucking day.

He had heard people talking before he had seen it. Pinky. Frogger. Fucking Four-Eyes looked like he was gonna toss his cookies. Katsuki had made it through the headline and then stopped. He didn't need to read anymore. He had surmised a lot of it because he wasn't a fucking idiot, and he had eyes and despite Ochako's reticence to talk about anything with anyone besides her therapist- she showed a lot.

But still he had no need to know details that Uraraka didn't find necessary to share.

But when he had read even the headline- he felt an impossible-to-ignore desire to go find her. And, yes, some part of it was because he knew she'd be upset. She'd be hurting, and he wanted to help her. But there was something else- something that did surprise him.

He really *wanted* to be with her. It wasn't just for- just about- her in that moment. He had felt worried too- anxious to be away from her, knowing that she was hurting. And he really wasn't sure what to call that.

Was that a normal part of being friends?

Another vibration sounded. Then another and another. He pressed his hand to his pocket and found it wasn't his phone. It was coming from the front pocket of her bag. He reached into her backpack pocket and retrieved her phone, just to make sure it wasn't emergent.

*10 missed calls from Momma.*

*8 missed calls from Daddy.*

Shit. The phone started vibrating in his hand, and he looked from Ochako to the phone. She was still out.

Goddammit. He didn't even talk to his own parents on the phone.

“Hello?” A woman, Uraraka’s mother, was on the other line.

“Oh is...did...”

“Uraraka-san,” he said.

“Yes?” She sounded tired and sad, so much like her daughter.

“This is Katsuki Bakugo.”

“Oh, yes, of course.” Katsuki wondered briefly why she recognized his name, but then he remembered Ochako mentioning that she called her parents three times a week. He supposed it made sense that he would come up, given how much time they spent together. “Katsuki-kun.” The woman’s voice was trembling, her distinct dialect traveling through the phone. “Ochako’s friend.”

“Uh...yeah...”

“Are you...” her voice faltered. “Are you with her?”

Katsuki sighed and looked down at Ochako, his thumb and forefinger catching strand of her hair. “Yeah,” he said. “Uh...yes, ma’am. I’m with her.”

“She’s...she’s...how is she? Can she...”

“She’s resting right now,” he said, his voice low. No need to tell her everything right now. Ochako could tell her later if she wanted to. “But I can wake her if...”

“No,” she said hurriedly. “No. She should rest. We just wanted to check in and make sure that she wasn’t...” her voice weakened into nothing but hard ragged breaths.

*Please don’t fucking cry. Please don’t fucking cry. Please don’t fucking cry.*

“Could you ask her to call us when she wakes up?”

He nodded slowly, rubbing his forehead as the headache gathered behind his eyes. “Yeah.”

There was silence for a moment on the other side of the phone, and he thought for a moment that she had hung up and he missed it until a shaky breath proved otherwise.

"I...we...we really appreciate you, Katsuki-kun." He squirmed uncomfortably under the sincerity of her voice. "Please...we know it's a lot to ask, but please..." her voice hitched with emotion.

"Yeah," he said, answering the unasked question, seemingly unable to summon even the pretense of annoyance with the woman on the other side of the phone. "You got it."

"Thank you, Katsuki," she said. "You...take care of yourself too, okay?"

"Yeah," he said. "Will do."

He heard her breathe a sigh of relief on the other side before offering one last exhausted goodbye before hanging up. He closed her ancient flip-phone and dropped it back into Ochako's bag, and once again made himself comfortable against the wall. He wasn't much of a napper, but he was warm, and he wasn't in a rush to get back. So, he closed his eyes, and he waited.

###

When Ochako woke, her head was pounding, her body boneless and weak. She was comfortable though, comfortable and warm. She cracked her eyes open to see the darkening sky overhead. She was covered in her- his?- black hoodie that had been in her bag. And...

She jumped slightly when she realized what, who, she was using as a pillow.

"Don't move too fast..." She blinked up shyly at the blonde, whose head was resting on the wall, his eyes still shut. "Don't want you dropping like a fucking baby giraffe."

She slowly lifted her torso up and grabbed hold of her knees as she rolled out her neck. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice strained and gravely.

"You say that too much," he said, peering at her from the corner of his eyes. "Knock it off."

She snorted and rubbed her face before looking around more fully,

attempting to orient herself. She was in the grass. Her bag was by her shoulder. They were up against a brick wall. "What happened?"

"You had a panic attack," said Katsuki. But his voice was calm and casual. "Then you biffed it."

She sighed and shifted, so she was sitting on her knees beside him. "Right."

She felt confused and heavy, her head pounding slightly from her impromptu nap. And, while less overwhelming now, the nagging notion that everyone would know still rolled like acid in her stomach.

A dull throbbing ache in her gut.

"Katsuki..." her back was to him as she looked out into the evening lights of the city. "Did..." she rubbed her arms, an attempt to self-soothe. "Did you read it?" She wasn't sure if she minded either way. She was still sorting it out inside of her. Logically, she had known that something of that large of a scale wouldn't stay under wraps forever. But she had hoped to be a little bit more stable before the rug got pulled out from under her.

"Nah," he said. "People need to learn to mind their own damn business."

She laughed and gathered the hoodie in her lap to her chest before pulling it over her head and zipping up her bag. "You can if you want," she said, her voice soft as she stood to her feet. "I...if everyone else knows then..."

"Hey." She turned at the insistence in that one word. He was on his feet, his hands shoved into his pockets, and he was leaning toward her, his eyes narrowed and sparking with intensity, and maybe a little bit of anger- but not at her, she was sure of that. "I don't want or need to know a goddamn thing that you don't wanna tell me." She looked at him for a long moment, locked in the commanding insistence of his gaze, one that made her feel both vulnerable and capable all at once. But that had always been true- and she was relieved to find that hadn't changed. "That being said." He continued, his voice resolute with a tinge of something that almost sounded like embarrassment like he wasn't quite sure of what he was saying but wanted to say something. "There ain't a goddamn thing I'm scared of hearing either if it helps you for me to know, but that's the only reason I would need to know."

Ochako felt for a moment like she couldn't breathe- an odd moment that she didn't quite understand. But she was struck at that moment by just how much he meant to her, how much affection she felt for who he was.

She wouldn't have minded if he had read the story- like she said, she assumed most people would. But the fact that he didn't- the fact that it never occurred to him to do it without her say-so, the fact that he wasn't plagued by a morbid curiosity, it was so him, and that was comforting.

"Thank you," she breathed out. There was permission in his words, and that was all she needed to breathe a little easier. There was no expectation that she had to talk, but there was permission to talk if she needed it.

"Your parents called," he said, turning to walk toward the gate. Ochako fell in beside him, walking a little faster to keep up with his gait.

"Called you?"

He rolled his eyes. "Oh yeah," he said. "Don't you know your mom and I text each other all the time? We're in a book club together. I send her gifs and memes daily, and we chat about our lives, hopes, and dreams."

She narrowed her eyes at him, silent for a moment in the face of his sarcasm before she cocked an eyebrow. "Was that fun for you?" she asked, dryly. "Did it bring you joy?"

He smirked and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Yup."

She rolled her eyes as she pulled her phone out. "Shit. So many missed calls."

"Yeah," he grumbled. "That's the only reason I answered. Didn't want your parents thinking you were dead in a ditch."

"Yeah, thanks," she said, with a nod before pocketing her phone.

"Gonna call them back?"

"I will later," she answered wearily. "Too tired right now." He watched her for a moment before looking forward again without a word. "They're...they're good parents." She said it, almost shamefully,

like she needed to explain to him why she wasn't calling them back right away. "They're...they're giving me a lot of space, and I know it kills them, but I just- it's so hard to be around them."

"Why?" he asked, his gaze fixed forward as they passed through the gate. It was getting darker early, but they were still several hours away from curfew.

"Because they know everything." She laughed bitterly. "They know, and they look at me like it's all they can see. They look at me, and it's like they are about to cry. And I just...I need time to be...be messy, and I can't be messy with them yet."

"You'll get there," he said. "So will they."

And she believed him because he never lied to her. And he always said things with absolute certainty.

"It's why I was...I..." she choked on her emotions. Poor Katsuki. He had dealt with too many of her emotions today. "...I was hoping it would all stay under wraps, at least until I felt a little more like me—a little more prepared. Having everything out there for the whole world to see makes me feel so..." she groped for the right word. "Exposed."

He snarled slightly, an angry bark of a sound. "Assholes," he muttered angrily. "It's still a fucking investigation."

"Supposedly, it was a victim," she said. "Who...who came forward."

He snorted as if that made little difference to him. "It's an ongoing investigation, and having the media out there speculating on it is fucking irresponsible no matter who it was."

He wasn't wrong. "Yeah," she sighed. "Identities weren't mentioned at least." She offered it weakly, like some small token of peace, assuring him that he needn't get worked up on her account.

One he quickly rejected. "Don't do that," he said, shaking his head. "You don't gotta protect me from my own feelings about it. I'm allowed to be pissed."

*Why did he always have to be so intense?*

And why did she feel a warmth bloom in her chest?

"You're right," she said, smirking up at him. "Those fuckers!"

He let out a bark of laughter and looked down at her with something that looked like affection if she had to guess. And when they arrived in the dorms, she looked up at the building and felt- surprisingly- not like she wanted to melt away.

“Taking the short cut?” he asked a silent offer to make excuses for her if she needed. She exhaled and looked up at him, thoughtfully.

“No,” she said. “I’m good.” He smirked down at her, not surprised, like he expected nothing less of her. “I am hungry, though,” she added.

He raised an eyebrow. “And?” She grinned at him expectantly. “Tch... what the hell you want me to do about it?” She grinned wider by way of answer, as they walked up the stairs. “Spoiled rotten,” he muttered. But Ochako knew she had food coming; Katsuki never really refused her food when she asked. She was surprised to find she had an appetite- given her nerves. But the anxiety attack had left her body worn and her energy depleted, and apparently with an appetite.

She stepped up, tentatively, into the dorm. When they stepped through the door, Katsuki went to the kitchen without missing a beat, and Ochako breathed in deeply when Deku looked up from where he was sitting on the couch, his face red, his eyes trembling. But now, when she looked at him, really looked at him for longer than the few seconds that she normally allotted any direct eye contact, there was no pity there, no revulsion, no fear, nothing but love and deep empathy.

Beside him, Iida was fretting slightly, but, similarly, he met her gaze with complete and utter acceptance and deep relief that she was still here. That she hadn’t run away. That she hadn’t retreated into herself again.

She smiled, assuring at them. She was okay. She was okay. When she was close to the couch, Shoto stood up from where he sat, letting her take his place by Izuku and across from the chair where Iida sat.

Deku opened his mouth like he was about to speak but couldn’t quite think of what to say. “Ochako...I...”

Ochako reached out and grabbed his hand, his fingers curled instinctively around hers- like it was the only thing keeping him rooted to the earth. For the past few weeks, Ochako couldn’t bring herself to look too long or too deeply at any of her friends. She had been afraid of what she would find there; she had been afraid that she



would find the weight of expectation, the hope that she would be who they remembered her to be. The Ochako she wasn't sure was still inside of her. Now she was looking.

And yes, there was worry there- so much worry for her. She sometimes forgot (which Dr. Shoko said was okay because she only had so much space inside of her to worry about others right now) that these people had loved her, had missed her, had been deeply worried for her while she was gone.

There was worry, but now because she let herself look just a little longer, she saw the unconditional love there too.

Something she wasn't sure how to receive right now- when she could barely stand to look at herself, but it was there all the same.

"I've been a bad friend," she started.

Deku's eyes widened, and Iida was practically on his feet, shaking his head wildly in protest. "Ochako," said Deku. "Please don't say..."

Ochako shook his hand and squeezed it, silencing him before he went into a sputtering, mumbling mess.

"No," she said. "I haven't been a good friend, and..." She looked over at Iida, who was leaning forward on his elbows, so he was closer to her. "And it's because I've barely felt human for the last three months." Deku's head bowed slightly, looking down at the hand he was holding, brushing his scarred fingers over hers. "And I haven't let you love me like I know you do."

Deku let out a broken sob. Iida's jaw was twitching with his own contained emotion, but he was looking at her like he wanted to do something, anything, but didn't know what. It was the "downside" to having her best friends- they wanted to act and move and help. It was hard to have no clear villain.

"I just haven't known how to let my friends love me. I...I know you want to help me- to, to save me like you've done for so many people. And I guess..." she breathed out slowly as she spoke her shaking truth to some of the people who deserved to hear it the most, to those who had earned it. "I was afraid if I couldn't find a way for you to do that, then I'd be letting you all down."

She looked between her two friends- two of the first friends she made at UA. The first two people she trusted here with her secret about why

she wanted to become a hero in the first place, and they met her with love and respect instead of the judgment she had expected.

“We’re all just kids,” she said with a sigh and shrug. “And...I don’t know what to do most of the time either.”

“Ochako,” Izuku said, his voice shaky. “You don’t have to worry about us at all. We just want to be there for you, no matter what. However, you need it.”

“Yes,” said Iida, in a rare moment of initiating physical contact as he reached out for her free hand. “You don’t have to be anything for us. We are just so glad that you’re back and you’re here. However you need to be in order to do that right now, we’re on your team.”

Deku nodded in agreement, and it was all Ochako could do not to cry right then and there. She cried about everything, after all. And it was odd to think that on a day like this, a day she had been dreading for so long that she could feel better than she had in a long while.

All from talking.

From telling them her doubts and insecurities.

From trusting them with that.

“Ochako...” She looked at Deku, his wet eyes wide and blinking. “I’m...I’m so sorry.”

And she understood what he meant. It wasn’t pity. He wasn’t apologizing. He was affirming- bearing witness, acknowledging that there is little else he can offer her at that moment.

“I know,” she said, moving to wrap one arm around Izuku’s shoulder, pulling him close, and then another around Iida until both boys were tucked beneath her chin, her cheek lying against Deku’s bushy green hair. Deku sank into the hug like it was all he had wanted for the past few weeks, Iida was a bit more stiff, in his Iida way, but he clung to her all the same. The only sign of his own emotions spilling out was the way his hand fisted into her shirt.

When she released them, and they pulled away, Ochako felt so much lighter, so much better, like she had finally let out a labored, pained breathe that she had been holding onto. She wiped away the remnants of Izuku’s tears, the ones she wasn’t wearing on her shoulder anyway. And offered him a soft, sincere smile.

Deku let out a breathy laugh and wiped his eyes once before he looked at her. “Did you- did you eat yet?”

This time the question didn’t sink like a rock in her chest; this time, she heard what was beneath it- what had always been beneath it that she hadn’t been able to hear before, and she couldn’t help but laugh at Deku’s mothering.

“Not yet,” she said, looking past his head toward the kitchen where Katsuki was making himself busy. If he had heard any of what was said, he hadn’t let on. No one minded their business quite like Katsuki did.

Deku turned to look into the kitchen and then back to Ochako, with a curious glint in his eyes. “Right,” he said. “Kacchan’s a good cook.”

“No one fucking asked you, nerd!”

Ah. So he could hear from in there, at least when he wanted to. Iida looked appropriately scandalized by the language, but Deku just smiled and shook his head. Then, briefly, his gaze fell serious once again. “I...I don’t know if you want to talk to her, but just a heads up, Tsu is pretty upset.”

Of course, she was. Ochako had known, had seen, the guilt that Tsu was carrying, but she hadn’t had the time or bandwidth to deal with it. And while Ochako wasn’t sure she did now either, she still wanted to check on her friend.

To offer her the same assurance that she had Deku and Iida.

To remind her that it wasn’t her fault.

But Ochako knew that was easier said than done.

“Thank-you, Deku,” she said. “I’ll talk to her.”

“Not until you fucking eat!”

She rolled her eyes at Katsuki’s shouted interjection, and when she looked back at Deku, he had that same look in his eye from earlier, like he was trying to sort out a particularly interesting puzzle.

“What?”

Deku blinked and shook his head. “Nothing.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, playfully before kicking him lightly in the shin. "Okay," she said. "Now go find your boyfriend," she said. "I didn't mean to kick him out."

Deku blushed furiously, but he didn't deny it outright either, which made Ochako bite back a grin.

"Oh my god," she squealed. "He is?!"

"No...no...no...", said Deku hurriedly. "Well, not...not right..."

Ochako did an excited jump. "Deku!"

"I think your soup is ready," he said, in a comedically obvious attempt to distract her as he stood up.

"No way," said Ochako. "You can't just drop a bomb like that and leave!"

Deku's face cracked into a wide smile like he was bursting at the seams to talk to her. "Mochi date soon," he promised.

Ochako nodded vigorously. "Yes. Absolutely!"

When Deku and Iida made their way out of the common room, back toward the stairs, looking a little lighter and happier than they had looked when she came in.

That was good.

Deku's joy was one of her favorite things in the world.

When they were gone, she moseyed over to the kitchen where Katsuki was stirring his stew, adding flavors into the pot- avoiding the more potent spices that he knew would be too harsh for Ochako. She noted this, and warmth spread in her chest. She knew that after he dished her up, he would add the rest of the spices that he preferred, but it was one of those things, one of those small things that reminded her of how this cranky blonde thought of her.

"Y'all are like old ladies gabbing at the salon." She laughed and leaned into the counter, watching as he stirred the stew, as he added the browned meat, as he brought the broth to a boil. For her. "Deku and Icy hot work their shit out yet?"

Ochako opted not to tease or comment about the fact that he cared enough to notice- something unheard of a year ago.

“Don’t look so surprised,” he said. He looked up at her and scowled before switching his spatula into another hand to free up the one closest to Ochako. She watched him curiously (he was so hard to read in some areas and so easy in others) as he raised his thumb up to swipe suddenly under her eye- smearing away the tears that she didn’t even notice were there. Tears were always on her face these days- it was her constant and frustrating state. “They’ve been attached at the hip since you went missing,” he continued without missing a beat, as if it was normal for Katsuki-fucking-Bakugo to wipe away stray tears. And the very thought brought a stab of guilt.

It *was* normal- she supposed- and she needed to stop being surprised by it. It wasn’t fair to him- he had continually stepped up for her in surprising ways. He had been a good friend, was a good friend in so many ways that she knew was not always comfortable for him.

She never much doubted he had known entirely what he was signing up for when he brought her those notes, and, yet, he had never really faltered or failed to show up when she needed him.

They were friends.

“What!?”

The word broke through her reverie, firm, and defensive, and brought her gaze back to him. He was looking at her, eyes filled with suspicion.

“What?” she repeated innocently.

“You’re looking at me all weird.

“Oh,” she looked away and back up to the counter before grabbing the edge and jumping up to sit on it, swinging her legs out slightly as she peeked into the pot of stew. “Sorry, I was just thinking.”

“About?”

She thought for a moment about whether or not she should say it. But she was on a roll now- and she had at least two breakdowns in front of him at this point, so what was the harm in telling her what she was thinking in a slightly less hysterical way.

She looked up at him, his back now to her as he reached up into the cabinet to retrieve a bowl.

“Do I...Do I rely on you too much?” The question poured out with a startling insecurity- like some part of her had wanted to take it back before she even finished. He froze for a second, a bowl in each hand, before turning to face her. She quickly threw her gaze down to the tiled floor.

“What?”

She puffed out her cheeks and blew out a breath of air. Trying to make sense of the question for him, to mine out where it came from. Instead, she let out a frustrated growl.

“Use your fucking words,” he said, as he ladled out some soup for her and handed her the bowl. She took it and set it beside her on the counter.

“I don’t want you to think that I... that...I don’t want you to think I’m just using you,” she finally managed. “Or...you know...taking advantage.”

“That’s stupid,” he said, adding his preferred sauces and spices to the broth. It was her turn to scowl as she reached out to him, the temporary height advantage of being propped on the counter giving her the ability to easily grab his shoulder and pull him in front of her.

“Don’t do that,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s not stupid.”

He let out a small sigh of frustration and looked to the ceiling- no doubt gathering the wherewithal for another conversation about feelings. She raised her other hand and tentatively rested it on his other shoulder, keeping him planted in front of her.

He could easily walk away if he wanted to. But he didn’t budge.

“When we became friends,” she started. “I’m...I know it was more for me than it was for you.” He didn’t deny it. There was no use in that. “Because...I...” her voice went small and quiet, her eyes focused on the ground, on the toes of Katsuki’s shoes. “I needed...someone... anyone...” No, that wasn’t right, either. Not quite true. Her ears burned, and she kept her gaze fixed downward. “I needed you a lot. You didn’t-don’t- need me.” She didn’t dare look up, but Katsuki had yet to pull away from her. “And you’ve been a really good friend to me.” She swallowed back her emotions- while tears, she was beginning to re-learn, were okay, she always needed to figure out how to not become a sobbing pile of mess during every single conversation.

She was going to dehydrate at this rate.

When she looked up at again, she could see the clench of his jaw and his knitted brow, almost like he was upset.

“Sounds like your friend dumping me now that you’ve sorted some shit out with that fucking nerd,” he snarked, his voice light and mocking, but she recognized the tone. It was not so intense or obvious, but it was a few shades off of the way he had spoken to her when they had fought- when she hit rock bottom- like he was a little hurt.

“Oh god no,” she said, shaking her head and gripping his shoulders a little harder. “No...no...Katsuki not at all.” She exhaled. “I just...I know...I don’t want you to feel obligated to be there for me. You help me so much, and I don’t want that to be all that we...”

“When the fuck have I ever done anything out obligation, Cheeks?”

The nickname fell from his lips without a second thought, and she was surprised that it didn’t prompt the churning unease that it once did.

“I just...I’m a lot right now,” she said and then smirked at him. “I used to be a really good friend to people, and I feel guilty that you’re stuck with the needy, pain in the ass version of my friendship.”

“Tch...no fucking kidding,” he said. “You are a pain in my ass.”

She swatted him on the shoulder, and this time, she did pull him closer. He stumbled slightly, awkwardly bumping into her knees.

“You do so much for Katsuki,” she said. “And I don’t want you to feel like it’s one-sided. You cook for me...”

“You can’t cook,” he snorted, trying to keep up a pretense of annoyance under her sincere words, but the blush spreading over his cheeks was telling. “It makes good sense.”

She let out a small laugh and shook his head. She knew he was willfully missing her point, but she didn’t mind. It was his way of telling her what he didn’t know how to put into words.

That it wasn’t one-sided.

That- even if Ochako couldn’t even begin to guess what it was- Katsuki got something out of this friendship too. But he wasn’t going to say

that. And that was okay. So, instead, she rolled her eyes at him and shrugged.

“I guess I’m just telling you that I’m really grateful for...for everything.” She looked him straight in the eyes now, his intense red gaze locked on her- his eyes darting from side-to-side like he was trying to focus on both.

“Then just fucking say that,” he finally barked, pulling away and returning to his pot of stew. “And don’t mention it,” he grumbled back. She smirked and jumped down from the counter and turned to face him.

“Fuck what now?” he asked, dropping his ladle once again. Her smile broke wider, and she held out her arms. His face scrunched in distaste and annoyance. “Pain in my ass.” But he held out one arm to her all the same and motioned impatiently, making it clear that he wasn’t going to move toward her.

She would have to do the work for this one.

Which she didn’t mind.

She closed the space between them hurriedly and brought her arms up under his, grabbing tight at his shoulders as she snuggled closer into him. He returned the hug as he always did (at least in the two hugs that they had shared), awkward and uncertain at first until one hooked around her shoulders and the other barred across her back. He never seemed to know what to do with his hands, though.

She was about to pull away, to put him out of his misery and not test her luck any further, when, quite suddenly, his cheek fell to rest against the top of her head, folding in on her in a way that was stupidly comforting and warm.

They stood like that for a few seconds before he spoke, his words only slightly muffled by her hair. “I don’t do anything that doesn’t make me a better hero, Uraraka.”

She smiled into his shirt and sighed, a small soft sigh of relief. To anyone who didn’t know Katsuki, she could imagine how that would sound. But to her, it was the only affirmation she needed to hear, his surest declaration that as much as she relied on him, that he, in some small way, relied on her too.

That somehow, she made him a better hero.



She couldn't imagine it was true.

She couldn't conceive of it in her current, muddle mind and her rock-bottom self-regard. But, Katsuki didn't lie to her. So, maybe, it was true.

"Now eat your damn soup so you can go talk to your dumb friends."

She laughed and pulled away to retrieve her soup, the warm, fragrant broth suddenly the most delicious thing she could imagine in her hungered state. Katsuki moved to serve himself a bowl as well.

"And don't stay up too late gabbing," he said. "Frog girl can manage her own damn feelings."

"Yes, sir," she said with mock formality.

"And don't forget Mic's essay is..."

"Katsuki," she said, sipping at her spoon. "I did that last week..." he narrowed his eyes suspiciously at her like he didn't quite believe her. "Believe it or not, I wasn't a bad student back in the day..."

"Tch..."

She laughed. "Okay," she admitted. "Maybe I was bad by your's and Momo's standards, but I did really do my homework and everything pre-PTSD brain." His nose scrunched slightly at the tasteless joke, but he didn't reprimand her. "But," she added. "You're right. I do also forget what day of the week it is right now, so I appreciate the reminder."

He leaned against the counter across from her, stirring his hot stew with a spoon. "When are you leaving?" she asked.

"Eh?"

"For Christmas break," she added. It was coming up soon. They didn't have a long break, not even a full week. But still, most people who could, went home for a few days.

He shrugged. "Eh, probably a couple of days after finals. Ain't in any rush to get back to the house or the old hag."

She choked on a noddle. "Katsuki!"

"Fuck off," he said. "She's my mom. I'll call her whatever the hell I

want.”

She laughed and rolled her eyes. “She gave birth to you.”

“So,” he shrugged. “I didn’t ask her too!”

“Fair.”

“What about you?” he asked, diverting from talk of his mother.

“I’m only going for the weekend,” she said.

“Why so short?”

She shrugged. “Therapy. Dr. Shoko doesn’t think it’s a good idea for me to miss a week of therapy, and given this week, she’s probably right.” She was definitely right. “Aizawa also has some extra work for me. Might as well use the time to get a little more caught up.”

He nodded. “I guess,” he said, but he didn’t sound convinced.

“What?”

“You just...” he shrugged, awkwardly. “You seem like someone who would like Christmas, is all.”

For some reason, that comment made her smile. “I do,” she said.

He didn’t press further. She was sure he understood. She did like Christmas- she hoped that she still liked Christmas.

They finished their soup in companionable silence, cleaned their bowls, and stored what was left in the fridge- and through it all, she felt more and more relaxed. It was hard to believe that a few hours ago, she had been certain that her life was ending- ready to throw in the towel because what was the fucking point if she kept working only to be smacked down.

It was hard to believe that she had, so quickly, managed to get herself back to baseline- with the help of people around her. Maybe Dr. Shoko was on to something.

Because she felt fine. Not great. Not really good even. But she felt fine. She knew she’d still have to face some of the whispered speculations around campus and the worried looks from her friends. But right now, she felt okay.

And even as she made her way to Tsu's room, her nerves vibrating inside of her, she still felt okay. Nervous, yes. Because whatever Tsu needed right now, Ochako very much doubted that she could give her, but still, she wanted to see her.

Genuinely.

Which was not something she could have said of any of her classmates not so long ago.

She knocked on Tsu's door and looked down at the sleeves of her hoody, waiting, and when the door opened, she was surprised to see Mina standing there. "Oh, Mina," she said. "I..." She checked again. This was for sure Tsu's door. Ochako looked past Mina into the room. It was crowded in Tsu's room- apparently, every girl from Class 2-A was gathered there.

"Hey," Ochako continued nervously, waving. "I...I can come back."

Mina interrupted by reaching out her hand towards Ochako. Ochako could see the girl vibrating from the strain of not grabbing Ochako and pulling her into the hug that she wanted. And that act alone made Ochako feel very loved.

So instead, Ochako stepped toward Mina and threw her arms around the girl's neck.

They were all here for Tsu. Because Tsu was upset. And because that was what this class did for each other. They supported each other; and showed up for each other. And she knew, had known, they were chomping at the bit to do it for her too. But they had held off- stomped down their desire to help her in the way that they *wanted*- so that she could figure out how she *needed* it.

They had been waiting for her to ask.

And this ignoring, pretending like everything wasn't thoroughly fucked up for the sake of her friends- it wasn't working.

Not for her.

Not for them.

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, Ochako," said Mina, holding her close. "We just want you to know that we love you and we're here for you."

Sweet, beautiful Momo- usually a little more awkward with affection- had her arms around her next, and Ochako felt deeply held and safe. And then, Jiro. And Tsu. And Toru.

“That’s right,” said Toru. “No matter what, we’re all on your team.”

Ochako knew it was no different than before. They hadn’t read the article and then felt pity for her. This affection and loyalty was not new. They had been ready to offer it as soon as she asked for it. She just hadn’t been ready to ask.

Not in this way.

She wasn’t sure if she was completely ready now. She wasn’t even sure how to respond. And even now, she felt the panic of being suffocated of being closed in on start to bloom in her chest. But this was different now.

She was getting stronger.

She didn’t need to run.

She just needed to talk. To tell them what she needed and when she needed, and trust that they would all listen to her. That they wouldn’t look at her, all rejected and sad and angry. And when she gently extracted herself from the group hug, none of them were. She settled onto the bed with them.

And they talked, and she talked. They cried.

She didn’t. Not this time. She was starting to make space for her feelings- but she wasn’t quite ready to feel everything with everyone. Not yet.

Katsuki and Deku, and Shoko were enough for now. But she was also confident that she would get there.

*Were you scared?*

*Yes.*

*How did you make it out?*

*The only way she could*

*How can we help?*

*By listening. She wanted to ask for help, but she didn't want to be overwhelmed by it either.*

*How could they be there for her?*

She didn't know how to answer it yet. There was once a time when she would have said to treat her just like everyone else, to treat her like the same old Ochako. But she knew that wasn't going to fly anymore. She didn't even believe it herself. She was in therapy. She was doing work to reclaim her quirk. She was still detached from so many of her physical needs, and her body still didn't feel like hers.

She told them about their girl's night and why she had left. About the embarrassing outfit and the makeup- why she chopped off all of her hair and couldn't bring herself to wear skirts anymore.

And somehow, the conversation moved past her- in a way she appreciated, in a way she's sure the girls naturally went to when they saw her feeling weighed down by it just being about her. So they all talked.

About Mineta.

About the ways they had all been made to feel unsafe or unseen in their own bodies.

About the anxiety and weight of feeling like they had to be sexy or cute or coy to be successful as heroes.

About their hero costumes, and what kind of pressure had been put on them when it was designed, about how much say they actually had in the end.

It was all just a little less close to home, and it gave her space to breathe, to ease in. She wasn't ready to talk about all of it yet. She may never want to. But they all seemed okay with that. They wanted to know how they could help.

Ochako didn't make it back to her room that night until 3:00 am (Katsuki was going to have words for her, she was sure). When she got to her door, she found a plate of cookies covered in shrink wrap. There was no note, but one wasn't required, and she noticed that when she bit into the cookie, that Sato had gone a little tamer than he usually did with the flavors. Still sweet and delicious, but light and fluffy.

The next day she and all the girls were dragging in class, but she felt, for the first time in a long time, that she didn't have to fight to be with them, to laugh with them, to talk. She didn't have to constantly work to stay focused, to keep everything buried.

Because, well, what was the point? They knew enough now to know she wasn't okay. Not that she had anyone fooled that she was okay, but still, without the pretense, it was all so much easier.

“Uraraka.”

She looked up as Koda walked up to her desk, shy and bashful as ever.

“Hey, Koda,” she said, looking up to face the blushing boy. “What’s up?”

“I just,” he looked around, his eyes darting side-to-side and then landing on her desk again. “I just...I’m not really good at talking to people, but if you ever need to hold my bunny and talk to him. You can anytime you want. He’s...he’s a good listener, and he won’t tell me anything.”

It was all Ochako could do not to hug the boy and kiss his forehead. She settled for reaching out to squeeze his hand briefly. “Thank you, Koda,” she said. “I will probably take you up on that.”

He blushed even brighter but smiled happily as he made his way back to his desk.

She had been certain 24 hours ago that any ability to go back to normal was lost- but maybe it had always been lost- at least, the normal she had once known. Maybe she had been holding onto it just a little too hard in an attempt to create a farce that served nobody.

Least of all her.

But now, for better or worse, that farce was lifted. There was no pretending anymore. For better or for worse.

But she really hoped it was for better.

# The Frailty of Things

## Chapter Summary

More ass-hole behavior from the media jackals. And Ochako begins to process some of her guilt about Li.

cw: Nightmares, invasive memories

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the love you all have shown this fic. I expected writing it would be very healing for me. But I had no idea my interactions and comments with you guys would be equally healing and making me feel loved and accepted and held! Thank you so much!

Ochako looked at the green-haired boy across from her. They hadn't been to this café since last year- back when everything had been different. Then she had still been aching from one-sided affection, trying to sort out how she could be just friends with this boy who she didn't want to lose- even if he didn't like her back in that way.

It seemed so far away now. So silly in its own way. But she felt a stab of sadness, of missing that girl- she had so much affection for her. Deku settled in front of her, and she noted for a moment that she wasn't the only one who had changed. Deku was taller, his body seeming to catch up with his quirk- tough and bulky.

He was starting to look like a man; like the hero he had always been. He scooted the small plate into the middle of the table and handed her one of the forks. She cut off a little bite from the end of the cake and popped it into her mouth.

"Okay," she said, after chewing the sweet pastry. "I want to know when, where, and how!?"

Deku bit back a smile as he took his own bite from the other end of the cake. "When was- I mean... *when* is complicated. For all, I know it started at our first sports festival."

Ochako smiled into her teacup. "Yes," she said with a sage nod. "Some good ol' hostile sexual tension."

"Uraraka," he scolded, turning red. "N-no...that's not it, but..." he

sighed. "Okay," he added reluctantly. "Maybe that's a small part of it, but I didn't know at the time! I didn't even know I liked guys at the time."

Ochako looked at him sweetly. "And how do you feel about that?"

He raked his hands through his hair. "Uh...okay, I think...I don't really know what I am. Like I was attracted to you and Melissa too, so, I guess, does that mean I'm bi?"

"I can't really answer that, Deku." She reached across the table and covered his hand with hers. "I can just tell you that wherever you end up, it's okay. And it's more than okay that you're into Shoto."

He nodded and looked down at his coffee for a moment, a creeping, beautiful smile tugging at his lips. "Yeah," He said. "We...it was really hard on me when you..." he swallowed hard and blinked away the sadness. "I was in a bad place, and he was there for me, you know. Always."

Ochako squeezed before pulling her hand away. "I'm glad, Deku," she said. "I'm glad he was there for you, and you know he really does seem to like you." She took another bite of cake. "He's been really great to me too, and I think that has a lot to do with you."

"Not only because of me," said Deku. "He really likes you too. He's just...he's really hard to read sometimes. And I can't tell if he's just being a friend, and if he's inexperienced with that, so he thinks holding my hand sometimes is normal? Maybe he doesn't quite know the difference between friendly and romantic."

Ochako bit back a giggle at that, eyes shining with mirth. "Yeah, that sounds right."

Deku scowled playfully at her. "Not funny."

"You could just ask him," she said teasingly.

"Oooh, that sounds terribly awkward," he said.

"Yeah," said Ochako. "No reason to make it too easy on yourself by talking about it or anything."

"That's what I'm saying," he said, taking a sip of his coffee.

"I'm just saying," continued Ochako, leaning against the table



playfully. "You have chosen one for whom normal social cues won't be enough. And Shoto seems like the type to appreciate directness."

Deku nodded and hummed thoughtfully. "Yeah," he said. "I guess so. I just don't want to ruin anything."

"Yeah," she said with an empathetic nod. "I get that." She looked at him knowingly, and his expression turned sheepish and apologetic. "But I don't regret telling you Deku." He sighed tentatively, an apology on his lips that she immediately intercepted. "Oh Deku, don't," she laughed. "I'm saying that it was good! It cleared the air! Me wanting something out of our relationship that was never going to happen made it impossible for me to enjoy what we do have. Sure, it was awkward at first, but it was good."

Deku let out a sigh of relief at her words. "And if I talk to him," he said. "At least I'll know."

"Yup."

"And even if I'm misunderstanding, then I can start to enjoy him as he is."

"And you're really good at that, Deku," she offered. Deku's eyes shone with adoration and affection, and he let out a small sigh.

"I really missed you, Ochako."

"I missed you too, Deku." She really had. She had missed him when she was gone, and she had missed him when she first came back. It was always like she was watching him through a dark window, not quite able to get close to him. To feel his warmth and strength. "And you know that no matter what, I am always going to support you."

Deku looked for a moment like he was going to cry, and Ochako knew what this moment meant to him. What it meant that he could have this moment with her. She knew it meant a lot to her too. Deku opened his mouth to speak when, suddenly, a flash of bright light interrupted them, making Uraraka jump, her sudden movement jostling the table and spilling her coffee.

"Uraraka-chan!" She and Deku suddenly found themselves with a camera in their faces and a microphone being shoved at them. Ochako felt the immediate sensation of sensory overload, unsure of where to look or what to say.

“Uraraka-chan, it’s so good to see you out and about again!”

So she settled on the puddle of coffee that was gathering in front of her and dripping over the edge of the table. Ochako needed to clean that up. Her parents had always told her to leave a place cleaner than she had found it.

“Uraraka-chan, how have you been fairing at UA since your return?”

Another camera flashed, blinding her with little bursts of light. She was frozen. Frozen by the onslaught of questions, by the smell of spilled coffee. She really needed to clean that up; it was dripping on the floor and she needed to clean it up.

“Ochako...” she felt a firm hand on her shoulder, guiding her to her feet. She obeyed without thinking, before looking up to find it was Deku- not so frozen as she was. But he wasn’t looking at her. His eyes were narrowed, with the kind of fierceness he usually reserved for villains- and even some villains were spared the level of deep disgust she saw in his green eyes.

“Are you happy with the pace of the investigation, Uraraka-chan?”

“I...I need to clean this up,” she said, gesturing toward the spilled coffee. She wasn’t sure how. She looked around dumbly for some napkins.

“A few victims have started to come forward...” Ochako hadn’t known that. “Do you think it’s your responsibility as a hero to speak up about what happened?”

Responsibility?

Did she have one?

She was barely surviving most days- was she obligated to do more than that?

That sounded fucking exhausting.

“Deku,” she whispered. “Do I...I need to clean this...”

“It’s fine, Ochako,” he said, his eyes still locked on the news team. “We’re. Leaving.” There was an unmistakable snarl in his voice, one that would be chilling to anyone who knew him. But these reporters were not deterred. In fact, they turned their cameras and microphones

on Deku.

“Midoriya...” she supposed it made sense. He was the heir apparent to “Symbol of Peace” status, so he was used to being in the public eye. “Are you and Uraraka-chan dating?”

She almost laughed- would have laughed if not for the way she could all but feel Deku’s quirk crackling to life under his skin. “Come on, Deku,” she said, tugging at his arm. “It’s not worth it. Let’s go.”

She didn’t want to see him compromise that status on camera by losing his temper. She knew he wouldn’t hurt anyone, with his quirk or otherwise- but he may break something or lose his temper, and she didn’t want that for him. They started to move out of the café, only for the cameraman to step in front of the door, keeping the lens focused on them. “Has it been difficult, Uraraka? How do your teachers and classmates...”

Deku looked seconds away from snapping, of throwing that camera down and stomping it with his quirk-powered kicks. She stepped in front of him quickly.

“Actually,” she said hurriedly. “My teachers and classmates are amazing.” She tried to bring herself to smile, but she couldn’t quite summon up the energy for that. “I was actually having a really good day with my friend until you showed up. So please, if you don’t mind, we are going back to school.” She breathed in, expelling her anger as effectively as she could- listening to her emotions.

She noticed her breathing.

She was doing okay. For now.

But she could also feel the quaking starting in her knees. Telling her that she wouldn’t feel fine for much longer. She needed to get out.

“...You know,” she said, continuing. “Because we’re teenagers.” Her voice had an edge. She turned and nudged Deku to start walking toward the door. He wrapped an arm around her, holding her shoulder tight and close to him as they stepped out of the café and out into the chilled afternoon air.

She blinked hard, trying to chase away the night of the escape- the night she had ripped her hands open, the night that came too late for Li. The night when cameras and lights and shouted questions had sent her spiraling into panic.

It had been dizzying.

“Ochako...”

She tried to tug away from him and walk back toward the café. “I should...I should go and clean that coffee up...”

He held her firm, one hand on each shoulder and holing her in front of him. “Ochako...” she looked up at him. “You look pale,” he said. “Should we sit down?”

She shook her head. “No,” she exhaled, clutching tighter to him. “Just...tired. I want to get back.”

She could do this. She could keep it together. She was in charge of her body, her feelings, her reactions.

She had escaped.

She was out.

She was safe.

Li wasn't.

###

“I couldn't save him.”

Shoko looked at her, calm and inquisitive. “Who, Ochako?”

Ochako looked down at her shaking hands. They hadn't stopped shaking since yesterday; since the camera flashed and she was back outside of that hole, bleeding from her hands. She had torn her hands apart that day.

And it did fuck all to help Li.

She had been too slow.

“Li.”

“Li, who?”

“I don't know,” she said, Her voice low and trembling. “I don't know his real name,” she continued. “I...he called himself Li, and that was it. He was from...Russia, I think?” Her brain was hazy. She

remembered so many things, and other things swirled around unmoored in her mind- cloudy with the exhaustion and hunger that had accompanied those late-night conversations. But she remembered him. Remembered his voice; his kind, tired smile. She remembered his hand around hers.

Remembered the way he said her name on those nights when she felt like an animal.

Like less than human.

“I told him that I would save him... I told him that someone would come for us. I knew someone would.” Her voice cracked. “I just- I *knew* they would come for us.”

“But no one did,” offered Shoko quietly.

Ochako shook her head. “No one did. I thought if I smiled enough, gave him enough hope, that we would last long enough for someone to come and get us. I promised him that...and then he just...” Her heart was breaking, shattering. Not just with grief but with fear- all that fear crashing back. “He was just gone. He was there, and then- then he wasn’t. I went to sleep and he was there when I went to sleep and then I woke up and he was gone, and he never came back.”

“And you’re angry about that.”

She shuddered. “I’m so angry I can’t see straight.” She buried her face in her hands.

“At who?”

“At myself,” she answered shakily. “At me.”

Shoko waited for a moment after the muffled confession. “Is that true, Ochako?”

Of course, it was true. Who else would she be mad at? Who else could she be mad at? Aside from the monsters who did it. But they were villains- they behaved as villains did. But...she was a hero. She was supposed to be a hero. It was her job to save people. They were villains, and she was a hero. She had failed; they hadn’t. Who else was there to be mad at?

He had kept her going. His voice had kept her anchored in reality- *he* was the only one who had come to her rescue.

And she couldn't come to his.

And she had failed him. She had failed him, as a hero and as a friend.  
And she would never, ever be able to make it right.

Because she had fallen asleep. He had been taken. He had never come back.

And that was that. There was no way to make it right.

###

Katsuki knew something was wrong when she came back from therapy. It had been a while since she passed through her day like this, looking completely disconnected except for her weakly-offered absent smiles and nods, with nothing behind them.

It had been even longer since she opted out of training because she was tired. And when she offered that excuse over text, it only confirmed it. And when he went to her room to check on her, she didn't even open the door. He tried not to think too much of it. Tried not to worry. He had days where he screamed at anyone who looked sideways at him, so maybe she just needed space.

Maybe she was just sleeping.

He hoped that was all that it was.

For his part, his sleep was interrupted about an hour in by a frantic knocking at his door. Normally, he would be cranky, but he had gone to bed anxious and woke with a broiling instinct of anxiety- something being off. His instincts and reflexes were razor sharp.

He kicked off his blanket and hurried to the door, and crossed his room, throwing his door open.

“Raccoon eyes?! What the hell...”

“No time!” She grabbed him by the wrist and jerked him down the hallway. “I think she’s having a night terror or something. I heard the screaming and went to check on her, and she just...I...” Katsuki saw Shitty-Hair and Calamari already outside of her door. He could hear banging and breaking inside the room and her muffled sobs and cries.

Calamari was leaned against the wall beside the staircase, watching for any stirring classmates who may make their way down to inquire

after the noise. Kirishima was standing outside her door, and Katsuki wondered briefly if he had been sleeping in Ashido's room that night.

So far, it seemed the only people who had heard her were her floormates. Hopefully, it stayed that way. Katsuki reached out to grab the handle of her door and open it, but Kirishima stopped him.

"Be careful," he said, a distressed look on his face. "Her quirk is wiggling out."

He didn't know what that meant and frankly, he didn't really care. He opened the door and immediately had to grab hold of the frame to keep himself from being jerked violently into the room, caught in an invisible current. He was familiar enough with the sensation of his gravity being negated, but this was different. This didn't really feel like zero gravity, more like he was being pulled in by the gravity of some other body. In this case, it happened to be the gravitational field of the 5'1" underfed gravity-manipulator.

And he wasn't the only thing. Everything in her room was caught up in the vortex of her gravitational field. Her table, her books, fucking bed, all of it was bouncing and knocking against the ceiling and the walls.

Including her.

She was flat against the ceiling of her room, thrashing and banging against it, in the throws of some nameless horror; cries of protest mixed with pleas and a whispered name. She was begging and pleading and sobbing, her tears forming a gelatinous substance on her closed eyelids.

"Fuck..."

He let go of his hold on the door, letting himself get caught up in the current until he knocked against the ceiling a few feet away from her. Luckily, he had grown semi-accustomed to the Zero-G at this point. So he wasn't about to throw up, which he imagined would be much, much worse while actually in zero-G.

"Oi," he called out. "Ura...Ochako..." he spun and pushed and moved himself across the ceiling until he was close to her. "Come on." He reached out toward her wrist. "You need to wa-..." As soon as his fingers brushed her wrist, he was flung violently down, his elbow colliding painfully with the floor.

“Bakugo!”

He blinked away the black bursts in his vision from his throbbing funny bone and then waved over his shoulder dismissively at Kirishima. “M’ fine,” he said. But he definitely fell faster than was normal. He knew that was one of the newer manifestations of her quirk, one she still didn’t have full control over.

“Maybe we should get Aizawa,” he heard Ashido wonder aloud.

“No,” he snapped, pushing himself up off the floor, getting caught back up immediately into her gravitational field. “Don’t fucking get Aizawa.”

He didn’t know 100% why Ochako had such a big-ass chip on her shoulder when it came to him, but Katsuki knew that him bursting in and taking her quirk would only escalate this. Katsuki would get fucking Deku first- though the thought galled him.

He let himself hit the ceiling once again, and he rolled across it until he was close to her again, but this time, he didn’t touch her. His shoulder was close to hers but left enough space for her not to feel too crowded or pressed against. He didn’t want to send her spiraling more into...well, wherever she was right now.

“Ochako,” he said, looking at her; tears were almost drowning her closed eyes, her body was tense and rigid as a board, every muscle in her body coiled under some immense pressure. “I know you’re scared as fuck right now.”

A choking sob escaped her lips, followed by another wail of pain, heartbreaking and angry. He heard Mina let out a whimper at the door. He breathed out slowly. “I know you’re scared. I know you’re somewhere else right now, but...” he nudged her shoulder with his like they were lounging in the grass and not on the ceiling of her dorm. “I’m right fucking here. All right? I’m here.”

“Li...” it came out raspy and broken. “Li, I’m so sorry. *Please*. Please come back. I-I’ll save you this time. Just-just pl-please come back.” Her pleas were shattered and heartbreaking- asking for something that she knew wasn’t possible.

Katsuki tentatively curled his fingers against the palm of her hand. He waited to see if she sent him careening to the ground again, but she didn’t. Not this time. So he went ahead and laced his fingers with hers, slowly and carefully.



“S’sorry,” she slurred. “I’m...I’m s’ sorry...”

“Ochako,” he whispered urgently. “Ochako, you’re safe; you’re at UA. You’re with me.”

*You’re safe.*

She whimpered, and he felt her fingers tighten in response. “Katsuki.” Her voice was raw and pained. But she was awake now.

“Tch...” he tugged her hand, pulling her closer to him. “Yeah, it’s me. Don’t open your eyes yet.”

He worked his body so that he was belly up against the ceiling and pushed himself so he was facing her, both hands on either side of her head, creating distance and keeping himself from floating directly into her and caging her in. He used the heel of his palm to wipe away the gel film of her tears, sure that it wouldn’t be pleasant on the eyes.

When he was done, her eyes slowly, carefully opened.

“What’s...what’s happening?”

He smirked at her in the dark. “You’re floating the whole damn room, Ochako.”

Her eyes widened, and she looked around, stricken with panic and fear.

“Hey,” he said hurriedly. “It’s okay.” One hand found her cheek and moved to wipe away the still falling tears before they could gel there again. “Can you grab on to me?”

She didn’t need to be asked twice. She threw herself at him, wrapping her arms and legs around him in some form of a baby monkey hold. Katsuki’s palms were still flat on the ceiling, keeping himself pushed away from it enough for her to cling to him. He pushed off the surface and bounced them both across the ceiling and back to the door. He could hear her sniffing in his ear and feel her wiping her eyes on his shoulder.

“It’s okay,” he whispered into her hair. Maybe not even loud enough for her to hear. When he got close to the doorframe. He was able to get a good enough grip to swing his feet downward against the zero-g pull and guide himself down back to the floor. Kirishima grabbed his ankle and helped pull him flat to the ground. Kirishima’s hand gripped

his shirt tight, keeping him rooted to the ground until Ochako canceled her quirk.

“All right,” he whispered. “Go ahead and release now.”

The squeeze of her arms around his neck loosened for a moment so she could press her fingers together. He could barely catch the whispered “Release.” He tightened his grip on her and braced himself for the return of both of their gravity, bending his knees slightly to adjust and then barring his arm stiff against her back to hold her to him. Everything else fell with a violent crash, books spilling and her little desk splintering against the ground.

Her bed fell on its side, leaned up against the wall, the mattress sprawled across the floor.

It was too damn late for this.

“Hey, Ochako,” he said. She let out a small noise, letting him know that she had heard him. It was the only signal to him that she was even conscious. She was slumped limply against him, trusting him-rightfully so- to keep her aloft. “Your bed is a mess right now. You wanna stay with me tonight?”

The question- surprisingly- didn’t fall awkward from his lips. It felt like anything else he would offer to her.

Food.

A spar.

Homework help.

It wasn’t until he saw Mina’s slightly surprised face that he realized how that might sound. “Or Ashido,” he offered quickly. “I’m sure you could stay with her.” Racoon-Eyes nodded and opened her mouth to speak up, but Ochako dug her hands into his shirt and tightened the grip of her legs around his waist.

“All right,” he said. No one argued- no one seemed to care at all. Tonight- for now- she got whatever she wanted. He doubted anyone would disagree with that.

Not tonight.

He adjusted her slightly against him, trying to avoid grabbing at her

legs.

“You got this?” Kiri asked, looking them both over.

“Yeah,” he muttered, pressing a hand to the back of her head, steadying her. Her grip had loosened around him, and she slumped even more heavily, relying almost entirely on him to keep her from flopping, boneless, to the ground.

“Text me if she needs anything,” said Racoon-Eyes, biting anxiously at her thumb. Octopus, for his part, was keeping a respectful distance though, looking on worriedly. Katsuki nodded curtly before turning to walk back down the hall and toward his room.

When he was a safe enough distance from everyone else, he let out a small sigh into her hair and held her a little closer. “I got you, Ochako.” He wasn’t sure why that came out, but he wanted to say it, to assure her that even if he couldn’t make all this shit go away for her, even if he couldn’t fix it, he was with her now.

And it was surprising (although maybe not), how much he really meant that- how deeply he meant it in his bones; that he would just about do anything for her- if she asked; if she needed it. It was an odd sensation, but he was okay with it. He always meant what he said to her.

She made him a better hero.

Being a fucking friend made him a better hero, and he wasn’t sure why, but it did. Aizawa had told him as much, even though he didn’t explicitly mention Uraraka by name. Aizawa just noted, lazily, that Katsuki’s rescue and collaboration scores had increased significantly in his last few exercises and simulations.

He had an ego the size of Jupiter, but he also kept track of the things that made him better. He didn’t happen into anything; he worked, trained, and paid attention. That’s why he was the best.

He opened his door and carried her over to his bed, where he carefully lowered her down onto the mattress. Her arms slid limply from his shoulders as he pulled the comforter down for her. She moved, unresistant and still silent at his cues and small touches. Pliant and wobbly, she let him guide her down to the pillow. His blankets were a hell of a lot better than hers anyway. He grabbed the smaller blanket that he kept at the foot of his bed and made his way to the small couch.

“Katsuki...”

He turned to face her, a small mound in his bed, face buried in his pillow.

“Sit and talk to me for a little?”

He wasn't going anywhere. He was just going to move to the small couch against his other wall. But he felt a stab of nerves at her request. They had sat in a bed together before but never this late, never after curfew. And, yes, she was a friend, but she was also a girl- a traumatized girl. He wasn't about to *sleep* in a bed with her, for both of their sakes. But he *could* sit with her for a little while until she fell asleep. He remembered reading that touch was a very natural and effective way that humans in distress calm down.

Katsuki had shoved All-Might away when he had pressed Katsuki, sobbing, into his chest. But even so, at that moment, Katsuki could admit that he had felt just a little bit better.

“Touch helps to regulate excessive arousal and creates feelings of safety, protection, and autonomy.” He recalled it as if it were an answer on a test. Maybe not as warm as Deku or as natural as Shitty-Hair, but it worked for him. It helped him make sense of the ‘why’ behind all the things he did for her that did not come so naturally to him.

“Okay,” he said, sitting on the edge of the bed. “What do you need from me?”

She scooted into the middle of the bed. “J-just...” her voice faltered, insecure and awkward.

“Ochako,” he said, a little firmer. “Use your words,” he said. “I don’t want to make shit worse, so tell me what you need.”

“Just...just sit beside me?”

He exhaled slowly and shifted onto the bed, pressing his back against the headboard, not unlike how they would watch a movie together. She shifted closer until she was situated under his arm, her head resting against his chest.

A little closer than she normally would, but this was usually where her head ended up if she ever got close. He assumed it had something to do with the heartbeat- something to ground herself, something to try

and match her own breathing too, something to remind her that she wasn't in whatever fucking hell hole she had been in. He rested a hand on her head.

"Katsuki..."

"Huh?"

"Did I hurt you?" Her voice was raspy with sleep and weighted emotions.

"What?" He was getting good at reading what was behind her weird-ass questions and phrasing, but it must be too late right now because he had no idea what she was talking about.

"My quirk," she said. "It was...it was all over the place. Did you get hurt?"

"No," he answered- not a lie, not really. "You're much worse when we spar," he added on. She tightened her hold around his waist. He jostled her slightly. "Seriously," he said. "I ain't that weak."

She didn't respond to that, but she shuddered against him, curling her fingers into his shirt and loosening them at regular, timed intervals.

"I...I didn't know where I was." He wasn't sure if she was explaining herself or just talking it out.

"I know."

She let out a small, shaky whimper. "I was really cold and hungry. God, I was so fucking hungry all the time in that place. I thought I was hungry my first year at UA, but that...that was nothing compared to this. I thought all the time about all the stuff I was going to eat when I got out." He could feel her tears dampening his shirt. They had talked before. They talked a lot. But not about this...not really, not so explicitly. She held it all close to her chest and, he assumed, shared with her therapist. But she had never really told him how she felt in that place. "And then, for some reason...for some reason when I actually got out, I couldn't eat any of it."

"What did you want?"

"Mochi."

He scoffed, quiet, and light. "Sure."

She peered up at him, still crying but with a small smile. "Mochi and tempura and curry and raindrop cake and sushi. I..." she dropped her gaze again. "I was so scared and so fucking hungry, but I made plans. I thought about what I was going to eat when I got out because I knew...I knew someone would come for me. I just...I didn't doubt it for a long time. Li...I told Li that someone would come for us, that people were looking for me." Her breath hitched as her voice grew more strained and overwhelmed and searching- filled with resentment and betrayal.

People always come at UA.

It was a rule of the universe.

The pros- their teachers- showed up.

They did for him.

For that Eri kid.

They had for Deku.

For all of them.

*Of course* she thought they would come for her.

"And then no one did. I promised Li that we would get out-that we would be safe, and he just..." her voice cracked. A sob broke through her body that seemed to go all the way down to her toes. Her body twisted against him in some deep pain that it was trying so desperately to expel like it wanted to fold in on itself. Katsuki dragged his fingers through her hair, massaging them lightly against her scalp as she shook against him. "I was asleep, and when...when I woke up, he was just gone."

He held her tighter.

He breathed deeper.

And deeper, giving her a steady up and down rhythm to sink into.

"I didn't figure it out in time to save him," she looked down at the white scars that ran down her fingers. "He held my hand and called me by name when I wanted to die because everything-everything in my body hurt so much. And I couldn't even save him."

Li. She had been called his name when he reached out for her hand.

"I keep thinking I'm almost out," she confessed with a deep ache in her voice. "I feel like I'm almost out of the hole, and suddenly I'm starving and bleeding inside that cage again, and I..." she was beginning to sound breathless and panicked again. He cradled her head to chest and took a deep breath.

"Breathe..." he reminded her in a quiet whisper. She nodded under his hand and took a deep breath.

"...And I get so angry because no one came for me, and because I couldn't save Li, and he died scared and alone, and no one cares except for me, and I couldn't do anything. And it's..." another sob broke through her words, but this one sounded clearer, less labored, and less caught by a hook in her throat. It sounded human. "God- Ka-Katsuki. I can't close my eyes or sleep or sit in silence without thinking about how he must have felt. I start thinking, "w-was he alone?" "was he in pain?" "was it fast?" "was he scared?" And I just..." she shook her head like she was trying to shake the thoughts out of her as a hot fresh wave of tears escaped. "And I can't stop myself when I start, and then it's like I'm in the hole again, I'm right back where I started."

He had no idea what to tell her, no idea what to say. But that was okay for now because he didn't really trust his own voice. He was angry too.

At everyone.

At everyone who didn't find her.

At Deku for not noticing sooner that two of his best friends weren't on the bus.

At Aizawa for letting her go back at all by herself.

At those shit-eating, pussy-ass villains who took her, and he understood for the first time, just a little bit what Stain was on about when he talked about villains and heroes. Sure, Katsuki wouldn't discriminate with which villains he took down, but he felt, in his soul, that there was a difference in the types of villains in the world. Something he wasn't sure he had thought before.

And most of them didn't make him feel this sick, twisted feeling of hate that he felt any time that he indulged, even for a moment, to think of the people who did this; the ones who fucking destroyed someone because they could.

Well, not destroyed- obviously- but did their damn hardest to.

But anger was an old friend of his, one that didn't scare him in the least. So he knew that anger wasn't the only thing he was feeling while she talked- because something else twisted uncomfortably in his stomach, tying it into knots.

He was sad too, and that sadness felt heavy and tight at the base of his throat. He was frustrated, and it itched at his fingertips because being sad didn't help her. He wanted to act, to do, to fix. But there was no way to fix it.

She had been on a school field trip, and then...

She wasn't.

She had been safe.

And then she wasn't.

Li had been there with her, and then...he wasn't.

Everything was so fucking frail, and that scared him more than he ever wanted to admit.

More than he could say. And he found himself in the even more terrifying truth of what it meant to have friends- to care about people- in a world like that. And even more so for those people he cared about to be heroes. Running toward the fray instead of away like normal people.

He could handle doing it himself. He could run straight into the valley of death without a single dreg of fear.

But if he let his classmates in, let them be his friends- if he was going to hold Ochako like this while she went through hell...

Well, that was something else all together.

What did it mean to watch them do it too? To watch the people he cared about be just as reckless with their lives and bodies as he was?

That was so much harder.

And he still didn't know how to do it.

All he could do was let her lay her head on him, breathe deeply for



her, and let her know that she was not alone.

“I...” it came out lower, more weighty than he had intended. “I know you’re tired. I know it’s fucking unfair as hell that you have to keep dragging yourself out of that place. And...” he growled in frustration as he stumbled over his words. “But for whatever the fuck it’s worth. I...” she tipped her head slightly upward, catching him in her watery gaze. “I hope you keep trying. I want...” He swallowed hard. “...I want to see you keep trying.” She exhaled, her eyes sliding shut.

He wanted to tell her more.

He wanted to tell her that he would help her, that he would do whatever he needed to make her feel safe, but those words didn’t come.

He wasn’t so good with words.

So he just held her until she fell asleep against him before he carefully untangled himself to go to the couch- because she had not explicitly said she wanted to share the bed the whole night. But he held her just a little bit before letting go of her.

“I’ll make you mochi,” he whispered. “As much as you want. I’ll make you tempura and curry and raindrop cake and sushi. Whatever the fuck you want.”

It was the least he could do. It was the only thing he knew how to do right now.

# Paying Attention

## Chapter Summary

Double Update this Week! I had intended this to be part of a longer chapter, but then that chapter ended up being really long, so I've broken them down into two chapters and edited this first part early for a kind of transitional chapter :)

This one is Christmasy and sweet and Ochako gets to see her parents again! Not a lot happens here plotwise, but they all deserve a break and I wanted a Kacchako Christmas exchange :)

I'll follow up with the longer part of the chapter this weekend!

Thanks again so much to everyone for reading and commenting, it's really made writing this story both healing but also enjoyable. So thank you so so much!

Eijiro was a goofy dude. He wouldn't deny it. In fact, he enjoyed it. He liked making people laugh. He really liked making people smile. He thought it was a sure sign of manliness to light up the lives of the people around him and make their days a bit brighter.

He liked putting people at ease with a goofy comment or joke.

But none of that meant he was dumb (despite what Bakugo would say sometimes), but he could see how someone might think that about him, because well, he was a goofy guy sometimes.

But the truth was, he paid attention.

To Mina.

To Jiro.

To Uraraka.

To Sero.

He paid attention to his friends, to his explosive, volatile best friend. And Eijiro wondered if his friend had any idea of the changes that were happening inside of him. He knew, on some level, that Bakugo had to know. The changes were not necessarily obvious, but they were significant.

But that being said, Eijiro hadn't mentioned it yet. He knew how Bakugo was, and he also knew the changes were still tender in the young hero- and even as manly as his friend was, Eijiro knew that Bakugo may shrink away if too much attention was put on those changes.

Usually, he just pretended not to notice. He pretended not to notice the way that Bakugo watched her, took notice of her, went out of his way for her.

Eijiro pretended that he didn't notice the tabs open on Katsuki's computer or the books in his room on trauma, PTSD, sleep disturbances, and recipes for non-spicy comfort foods.

Eijiro didn't *tell* him that he thought it was the manliest freakin' thing he had ever seen because, for all of his blustering, Bakugo was like a baby dear- if you approached him head-on, he might run away into the bushes.

Eijiro had thought for a while if he made a big deal about it that Bakugo would run. But he didn't think that now, not after Uraraka had woken them all up with her nightmares. He knew that Bakugo cared about her. But he hadn't known how much that was true until he saw the way that Bakugo held her, without embarrassment and without needing to backpedal or explain, without a second thought.

Without fear that it made him look soft or weak.

As if the idea had never crossed his mind; as if he was thinking of nothing else besides her and what she needed. And even now, as the class Christmas party came to an end and as the credits rolled on the Christmas movie that Pinky and Pikachu had insisted that they watch together, Bakugo didn't seem to care in the least that Uraraka had fallen asleep on him. At first against his shoulder and then about halfway through the movie, she had somehow managed to get under his arm, slotted against him like she knew he wouldn't push her away.

And he didn't.

She was sleeping too soundly for that right now, even with the noise in the common room as their class said their goodbyes before they all left for their week at home. Eijiro was all too familiar with Uraraka's sleep disturbances, so any sleep she could get was well-deserved.

Eijiro pretended not to notice as he helped the cleanup crew sweep the common room. He pretended not to notice the way that Bakugo's

hand was pressed into her back, almost as if to tell her that he was there.

Kaminari, however, lacked the good sense and self-control that God gave him and flopped onto the seat next to the couch with a shit-eating grin on his face. Katsuki didn't even look up.

"Well...don't you two look cozy..."

Eijiro watched from the kitchen. Bakugo was looking down at his phone, not even looking up to acknowledge the blonde. Clearly not embarrassed and making no move to jump up, to shove her off, to remove his arm from her shoulder.

Just as Kaminari made no move to leave. Kaminari was a good dude. He didn't mean anything of it; he just didn't know when to back off. He wasn't malicious, just sometimes unaware.

And right now, he was unaware that he needed to get out of dodge.

"Sooo," he said. "Are you two..."

Finally, Bakugo's gaze moved from his phone to Kaminari for the first time, silencing him with a glare.

"If you wake her up, I swear to God I'll blow your fucking head off, Pikachu."

His voice was calm, almost casual, but left no room for ambiguity about the honesty of his sentiment. Kaminari stood up and walked away without a word. And Eijiro didn't miss the way that Bakugo looked down at Ochako to make sure that she hadn't been stirred by the noise before he returned to his phone.

Yeah, Eijiro paid attention when he needed to.

And, it seemed, so did Bakugo.

###

Ochako was looking forward to the quiet. Something, she decided, was a change that she would make peace with for now. She found herself worn out so much easier these days, so the quiet days, not

surrounded by noise, were nice. The days where she could be alone without feeling guilty were good.

Deku had offered, of course, for her to stay with him, so she wasn't entirely alone before going home for the weekend. She politely-gratefully- declined and assured him she would see him soon, and she gratefully accepted his gift of chocolates...

And Mina's gift of cute headbands that she insisted complimented her pixie cut that she still had barely learned to style or manage. She looked down at the headband, black with an orange flower. She still wasn't a great accessorizer.

She could barely stand to look at herself in the mirror for long enough to do anything substantial.

But it was a cute headband. She situated it on her head and quickly looked at her small round mirror on her desk, magnifying her face. She held her own gaze for a while, locked eyes with the girl there. The girl who was her and wasn't her.

The girl whose eyes she was trying so hard to hold without a creeping feeling of sickness or sadness or loss.

She wasn't there yet. But she wanted to be. And that was something.

A knock on her door made her jump away from the mirror. She hurried toward the door and opened it to find Katsuki standing there.

"Katsuki," she said. "You're here!"

"Tch...I told you I would come by before I left, right?"

"Right," she said.

His eyes narrowed at her like she had done something offensive to him. She stepped back. "W-what?"

"What's that?"

He jutted his chin out at her. She looked over her shoulder. "What?"

"No, dummy..." he reached out and tapped her headband.

"Oh..." she grabbed the back of her neck, feeling self-conscious. "Oh... it's...it's a headband."

“Those are my colors...”

She blushed even more furiously and shook her head. “N-no...” she said. “No, they aren’t.”

He smirked at her. “They objectively are.”

“I meant...ugh...I meant that it’s a Christmas present from Mina!”

“Still, my colors.”

She rolled her eyes. He was impossible. She took a step back into the room. “One sec!”

She closed the door for a second and went to her bed, picking up the small, wrapped box there. She opened her door again and stepped out to meet Katsuki in the hallway, his duffel bag set on the ground beside his feet.

Oh, he was literally on his way out.

The thought stirred something in her, a realization. She was going to miss him. Even if it was for just a week.

“I got you a Christmas present.”

His nose scrunched up as he examined the offered as though it were a small explosive. “Why the hell would you do that?”

She rolled her eyes and smacked him on the shoulder. “Because it’s Christmas, and we’re friends!” She could see the small blush forming on his cheeks as he grudgingly reached out for it. “It’s not big or anything! It’s kinda silly...I just...”

He glared up at her, silencing her as he pulled on the wrapping paper. For some reason, she was suddenly feeling very self-conscious as he popped open the small box. His brow furrowed in confusion, and then a gremlin grin broke across his face as he held up the keychain.

“What the fuck is this?” he asked with a small laugh.

She blushed furiously. “It’s uh... a keychain and a lighter!” He held it up and raised an eyebrow. “In the shape of a stick of dynamite.” His smirk grew wider. “You don’t have merchandise yet,” she said. “And I figured if you ever do have merchandise, it will look something like this.”

He looked from the keychain and then back to her. "Thanks, Cheeks." He shifted his backpack around so he could hook the keychain onto the zipper.

She bit her lip to hold back her smile. "Well, thanks for coming by," she said. "I- I don't want to keep you waiting, So..."

He reached into his pocket without a word and shoved a folded square of tissue paper into her hand, a blush coming on as quick as she had ever seen one.

She smirked up at him. "After all the grief about me giving you a Christmas present..."

"Tch...it's not a Christmas present," he grumbled.

"Oh," she pressed, crossing her arms and looking up at him teasingly. "It's not?"

"It's a birthday present, smartass!"

"Can I open it?"

"I don't care when you open it," he snapped, looking up at the ceiling awkwardly. "It's yours, isn't it?"

She wanted to open it with him. But she also didn't want him to feel trapped. She knew how vulnerable things like this were for him.

"Thank- you," she said, brushing a thumb over the crinkly paper. His scowl softened a bit, watching her for a moment.

"Are you gonna open it?" he barked finally. She assumed that meant that he wanted her to do it with him there. She pulled back the tissue paper slowly. She saw the blue silk ribbon first, but she felt a bump under her finger. She pulled back the second layer and looked down at the small white talisman etched from a smooth stone.

A *baku* .

Her eyes stung with tears as she ran her finger over the amulet once more before looking up at him. He looked as insecure as she had ever seen him, both of his fists shoved into his pockets.

"It's supposed to help with nightmares or some shit like that."

Of course, she knew that. She had even had a picture of one in her

room as a child, her mother insisting that nightmare-devouring demon, even if he looked a little scary, would protect her from the monsters in her dreams.

She closed her palm and squeezed her eyes shut. Apparently, she had waited too long to speak because he was starting to get antsy. He breathed in, and she could hear the snarky comment crawling up his throat. But before it could, her free hand shot out and grabbed his wrist before moving closer for a hug.

He returned this one more readily than he had in the past, and she wondered if maybe he was going to miss her too.

“Thank you,” she whispered. He held her a little tighter.

“Whatever,” he said. “It’s nothing.”

That wasn’t true, but she let him say it. It wasn’t nothing, and they both knew it.

###

Katsuki couldn't quite explain the flush or the embarrassment or the excitement he felt when he gave her the gift. If asked, he would say he saw it while he was out and just purchased it last minute; if pressed, he would tell the truth, that he had looked high and low for it, went to different markets and stores, and shopped online until he found one that wasn't too big, wasn't too ornate, one she could keep on her with ease. He didn't have the intention of making it into a necklace for her at first; that had been his mother's idea- old hag was a pain in his ass, but she was good when it came to stuff like that.

At first, he had rolled his eyes at the idea; something about giving a girl jewelry made him feel awkward. He wasn't sure if that was a normal friend gift. But then he supposed he saw her wearing his hoodie all the time. Why should this be any different?

But it felt different when she held it in her hands, brown eyes wide with gratitude, sparkling in that way that was all too rare these days.

And it *felt* different when she put it on.



Though he still wasn't sure why.

What he was sure about, leaving her standing in her doorway after giving it to her was a lot fucking harder than he thought it would be. And he only just realized when he got into the car with his parents that they hadn't gone a week without seeing each other ever since she got back to UA. She was, it seemed, a fixture in his life now.

Someone he wanted to see, someone he wanted to stay close to. He knew some of that was that he was nervous for her. He knew a few of her anxieties about going home, about being with her parents. He knew she carried a hell of a lot of guilt about not being a good enough daughter.

As if the daughter who wanted nothing more than to provide a better life for her parents wasn't already leaps and bounds ahead of him as a kid.

Some of his feeling (embarrassingly) were that he was just invested in her- he wanted her to have a good Christmas, he wanted her to enjoy her Christmas. That mattered to him in a way he never thought it would.

And even if those were the only feelings he was feeling, he could handle that- they were different enough for him to notice, but not so much to be distressing.

"You ready to go, brat?!"

He slammed the door shut and rolled his eyes as he settled back into the chair.

"No," he snapped. "If I had my way, I'd stay in the dorms for Christmas, avoid having to look at your stupid face."

"Guys," said his old man, looking between the two of them. "It's Christmas."

"And?" asked Katsuki pointedly.

"And," said his father, looking at him in the rearview mirror. "It's a season of peace and togetherness, a time when mother and son can lay down arms against one another for a week and not go for the jugular with every word."

"Sounds boring as shit..." muttered Katsuki, looking out the window.

They drove in peaceful silence for all of two seconds before the old hag turned in her seat. He girded himself for another match of verbal sparring, but she was looking at him surprisingly sincere.

"Did your friend like her gift?"

Katsuki glared at her for even bringing it up, but it didn't sound like she wanted to tease him, which somehow made it even worse.

He nodded by way of answer.

The hag rolled her eyes. "Proud of you, you brat," she said, shoving his knee before turning back around to face forward.

Ugh...

He was all ready for Christmas break to be over, and he told himself it was so he could get out of his house and get back to training. He told himself that, and it was true.

But also, despite his carefully constructed denial, he knew a part of it was that he was really going to miss her.

###

Ochako looked down at her phone and then out the window again for the 100th time, her leg bouncing anxiously. The city had long ago become fields, signaling to her know that she was closer to home than she was UA. Usually, that sight filled her with excitement and anticipation, especially at Christmas. But, it was her first time going back this year, and so anxiety coursed through in place of excitement.

She shouldn't be nervous. It wasn't as though she had no connection to her parents since leaving.

She spoke to them three or four times a week- even if it was only for a quick check-in sometimes. It had slowly but surely been becoming easier- but there was still something that wasn't settling inside of her- some caught piece of herself that made it hard to truly connect with her parents in the way she used to. And she was worried when she saw them that it would magnify.

Dr. Shoko had told her to notice if they were her feelings or her

parent's feelings.

"You are entitled to your feelings, no matter what they are," she had said. "But so are your parents. You don't want them to assume you're feeling something you aren't, and you should work on extending them the same courtesy."

Shoko was right. Ochako had learned over the past few weeks, more and more, how so much of the distance and the disconnect was created by her projecting her own feelings onto the people around her. She had thought she owed it to them to be the old Ochako, and that created a brick wall of separation between them all.

And she imagined it was true with her parents as well.

But the guilt they felt, she knew she wasn't making that up, and that was hard for her to look at. She didn't want them to feel guilty; she didn't want them to feel like failures.

She didn't want her daddy to think he had failed to protect her.

She reached up and brushed the tips of her fingers over the baku pendant around her neck and breathed out slowly. She could do this. It was just a weekend. Her parents had given her so much space. They had let go of so much control so she could work her way through this.

They loved her so much, and she loved them.

And as soon as she stepped off the train, she saw that love. She let her eyes linger long enough to see it in the eyes of her parents. She saw it in the way they moved toward her, all excited smiles, but didn't wrap her in their arms. Letting her close the distance between them, which she did, as she hugged them both. They returned the embrace together.

"We are so happy to see you, Ochako!"

Her mother pulled away and smoothed out her hair. "Your hair is looking so cute, sweetie."

"Thanks," she said. "One of the girls at school also keeps her hair short, so she helped me out." Her dad took her duffel back and hooked it over his shoulder. "So where too next?" she asked tentatively, a tad nervous for the answer.

Usually, Christmas home meant a whirlwind of people, of parties, of

family members. To be honest, she wasn't looking forward to that in the least- some of them would be family she hadn't seen since last Christmas, and she could already picture them struggling to make conversation with her. She knew it would have to happen eventually- she didn't want to cut her whole family out of her life. But she also wasn't sure that she was ready to be crowded into a house with all 14 cousins, both sets of grandparents, and her many aunts and uncles.

"Well," said her dad, looking from Ochako to her mother. "We were thinking that we would grab lunch downtown while we're here and then decorate the tree when we get home."

"You haven't done that yet?" asked Ochako with a smile.

"Of course not, sweet pea," said her mom. "We would never do that without you."

Ochako smiled, finding herself surprisingly excited for the chance to decorate a tree with her parents. It was the kind of thing she wondered for a while if she would ever be able to do again, and once more the kind of thing she wasn't sure that she would ever be excited about again.

"And have hot chocolate?" she asked.

Her dad looked down at her, as though affronted that she even had to ask. "What do you think this is, amateur hour?" her dad laughed. "Of course hot chocolate!"

"That sounds perfect," said Ochako, and she meant it. Her mother took her father's hand, in that sweet, easy way that came so naturally to them, with complete trust that the other one would accept it. It was one of the things she loved about the, but something stirred in her that felt a little more like bittersweet sadness, and she was left wondering where that might have come from.

It was one of her favorite things about her parents.

There was never a moment that she doubted their love for her or for each other.

"Are we going to Oba Yui's Christmas party tonight?" It was usually on Christmas Eve, after all.

Her mom looked at her for a moment, a sweet smile on her face.

"Well, we certainly can if *you* want, Ochako," she said. "But we told

Yui that we might just be spending a quiet Christmas together this year if that sounds good to you. But that, maybe, we would go next year?"

Ochako could have cried right then and there- but she didn't want to stress her parents out. She knew what family meant to both of them; she knew that her mother always looked forward to baking for that party; she knew that her dad looked forward to drinking and playing cards and laughing until 2 am with his brothers.

Ochako was a second away from telling her parents that they didn't need to change all of their plans for her. That they could go to the party, and she would be fine.

It was her instinct to say that.

But she didn't. She fought back that instinct and replaced it with something far healthier, something that would let her enjoy her Christmas with her parents.

She reached out and accepted the gift they were offering to her.

"A quiet Christmas together sounds...perfect," said Ochako, with a deep sigh of relief. "That would be perfect."

Her father ruffled her hair, and the touch didn't send her reeling, and that was the kind of thing she wanted- needed- to hold onto. The wins- the big ones and the small ones- the ones that she could look to on the days that felt like five steps back. Those days didn't magically go away. She knew that, and Dr. Shoko warned her of that all the time.

"It's good to have hope, Ochako," she had told her. "It's good to be excited for the future and to be excited about the good stuff. Hold onto that, as long as you don't feel like a failure and hate yourself on days that feel like you're going backward. Both days are necessary for your healing."

But right now- she was in one of those good days, the days that felt like a whole leap forward. So she would enjoy that while she could.

# The Place She Misses

## Chapter Summary

Katsuki deals with some of his feelings, while a visiting student has eyes for Ochako.

## Chapter Notes

CW\*\*

My purpose for this chapter wasn't to pile on Ochako or create more trauma, rather to illustrate something that I, and I feel like many victims deal with, the guilt that comes when they experience any kind of revictimization. While in this chapter it's more her dealing with an entitled, asshole with bad boundaries (no violence or anything, but an attempted kiss because I wanted to show that consent and boundaries are important outside of assault situations), she goes through the process of "it must be because of I'm weak/easy target etc..." that so many victims go through because their red flags and ability to read (or overread) danger gets in the way.

So both a CW and an explanation for this chapter!

Thanks again so much for reading and commenting and leaving your feedback- it really means the world to me.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The new semester started much as it had at the end of the summer-normal, quick and with little regard for the break, and Ochako found herself grateful that hers had been short, that she had spent the days up to the weekend training and doing extra work for her classes.

She was even more grateful that her visit home had been uneventful, as her parents had promised her. It had been quiet and peaceful and small. It had been their traditional Christmas, scaled back a little. They baked cookies, they decorated the tree, and they watched Christmas movies. And they didn't cry- not once.

And she never would have guessed that that would have been something she would be so grateful for. One day she would talk to them; one day, they would sit and talk. One day she would explain how hard it was to make space for their feelings when hers were so

overwhelming.

One day she would hug them and cry, and the thought of it wouldn't be daunting.

But for now, she was grateful for a quiet Christmas home, where it didn't have to be about what had happened, even though she knew it was still there, inside of her and inside of them. But she supposed this was what it looked like to manage it- to have it be something but not everything in any given room.

It gave her room to breathe.

But still, she was also grateful to return to school, even though her visit home had been short. She had settled into a nice regular routine that helped to keep her in a state of relative control. Class. Therapy. Class. Quirk training. Class. Yoga. Class. Homework. Class. Training with Katsuki.

She liked it. It made her feel secure- it made her feel like she was getting a solid footing.

And then came the announcement that they would be hosting students from a hero school in the United States for a week.

She tried to latch onto the excitement of some of her peers, to Mina's enthusiastic speculations about what they would be like, to Deku's enthusiasm about getting to see new quirks and interact with different training methods. It was something that she once would have been excited about too, but now it felt like a disruption to a routine that had made her feel safe.

But she also knew that wasn't sustainable either. She wanted to be a hero, and that meant her life would be unpredictable, and she supposed this was a safe enough practice for now. Like ripping a band-aid off in a controlled environment.

If she could learn how to cope with some dysregulation now, maybe it wouldn't feel so jarring when the big ones came up.

She had to get to a place where she could learn to regulate herself even when the external world felt chaotic and unpredictable.

*She was with her class- then she wasn't.*

*Li was alive- then he was dead.*

Those realities dictated her whole perception of the world.

That unpredictability filled her with dread and made it hard for her to close her eyes at night for fear that everything would change before they opened again.

But she could do this.

She could.

“You’re doing really well, Uraraka.”

Ochako breathed out slowly, trying to lower herself deep into the pose that Ojiro was showing her. She didn’t really understand why this was so hard. She knew how to breathe, and she knew how to stretch; she could do freakin’ lunges. She was flexible, she could kick and swing her legs at an opponent no problem, and she pounced “like a fucking frog in a swamp,” according to Katsuki.

But all of it together, the breathing, the quiet, the sinking into her body, opening up her body, the tugging sensation in her stomach, the ache in her hips, the tightness- it was all so hard, and some part of her froze and tensed and resisted against the invitation of the movements and poses that Ojiro showed her.

Physically- she knew she could do it, but something in her didn’t want to.

“Doesn’t feel like it,” she muttered.

“It’s okay,” he assured her. “Your practice is for you.” He stood from his own position and lined up beside her. “Can you square your hips a little more?”

She attempted to adjust, to turn her body in a way that mimicked him, but it was like something inside of her was caught at every attempt- keeping her tight and closed off.

“I don’t...I don’t know...”

“That’s all right,” he assured her, his voice neither cloying nor reprimanding. “Is there something on your mind?”

She exhaled and rested a forearm on her thigh, still trying to will herself to sink into the lunge. “I don’t know,” she said with a shrug. “I’m anxious. I’m getting my head above water, and now we’ll have a



bunch of strangers in our classes and our dorms, and I...I don't know why that bothers me so much. I've always been a people person, but it's just..." she sank lower, pushing slightly past the light resistance- the bubble of panic catching in her throat before it dissipated, and her body relaxed more.

"That makes sense," affirmed Ojiro. "Regularity and predictability are important."

"I'll just have to find another career, then," she said ruefully, miming his movement as he shifted his feet together and then bent at the waist like a rag doll.

"No," he said, voice serious and weighted. "That would be a waste."

She smiled down at the ground. He meant that- the serious boy meant everything he said. He was always deeply sincere.

"Thank you, Ojiro," she said.

He exhaled, load, and intentional.

She followed suit.

"You're very welcome, Ochako."

###

Katsuki had grown more and more accustomed to Zero-G, but still, he didn't like being stuck there for an extended period of time, and it seemed that if he wanted to avoid that, he should have been quicker. Because she was showing no sign of being anywhere close to letting him down.

"God fucking dammit, Uraraka! Let me down!"

She rolled out of the way as he launched himself down toward her, his blasts sending him careening toward her even faster in his Zero-G state.

"Nope," she called. "You said quirks were..." her sentence ended in a bark of surprise as he kicked off a tree and sent himself sling-shotting back toward her. She jumped out of the way, negating her gravity and jumping up into the trees above her head, out of reach and sight.

“Do you quit?” she called out, not caring if she gave away her position. Katsuki’s eyes narrowed on the area the voice was coming from as he blasted himself forward, not too powerful. He didn’t want to overshoot and end up God knows where.

“Fuck, no!”

“Then you’re not coming out of Zero-G, sorry!”

He was almost to the tree he could have sworn he heard the voice come from when suddenly, something (someone) collided into him with the force of a much larger opponent than he knew Ochako to be. But he recognized the feel of Ochako’s finger pads digging into his wrist as they both slammed into the ground, him face first and her right behind.

“Fuck you,” he scowled when he got his face out of the ground long enough to turn to look over his shoulder, but that was all he could do as he was pinned beneath her, one arm forced above his head, the other twisted painfully into his back. She met his feral face with her own bright grin. Both were sweaty, bloody, and dirty, but, lately, that had seemed to be her favorite state.

“That’s not very nice, Katsuki,” she said, tightening her grip on his wrist.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “Get the fuck off of me.”

She laughed at his antics as she rolled off him and into the dirt, arms flopped back, one haphazardly hitting his chest as he rolled onto his back.

“Owe,” he groaned, rubbing the spot that she hit.

“Oh, you’re fine,” she returned, rolling onto her stomach beside him and resting her chin in her hands, looking at him as if she was expecting something from him.

“The fuck do you want?” he asked suspiciously, garnering an exasperated sight from her. “I want you to comment on the fact that I slammed into you with the force of a small planet! And that I did it so fast!”

He rolled his eyes and lifted himself up into a seated position. “You don’t need me to validate you.”

She sat up with him and stretched her arms out high above her head, tugging at her fingers to relieve the tension in her wrists. "Sure, I don't *need* it," she said, brushing the leaves and dirt out of her hair as she lowered her arms. "But I want it," she added with a cheeky smile.

"You're so fucking spoiled..." he reached for their water bottles, offering hers with a short toss. She caught it but kept her expectant gaze locked on him.

Fucking hell.

He was pathetic.

"It's fucking badass," he said. "Is that what you wanted?"

She smirked and nodded happily before taking a drink of water. "Now come on," he said, standing up. "We gotta get back, or Aizawa will have our asses for skipping out on this dumb reception." Then he scoffed. "Well, he'll have *my* ass. I'm sure you could get away with skipping."

Her mood fell slightly, but he wasn't sure if it was at the mention of Aizawa or the visiting school. "Ugh, I guess..." She picked up the black hoodie, reached into the pocket to pull out the familiar blue ribbon. And, again, that same mix of self-conscious anxiety and vulnerability rose up, manifesting as an inconvenient blush.

"Dammit..." she muttered.

"What?"

"The ribbon untied," she answered. She turned her back to him and moved as though she were going to tie it herself but stopped. "Can you tie it for me?"

"No!" He didn't know why it came out all blustery and loud, but it did, and now he was blushing even harder, an almost familiar tingling in his hands, but still different than what happened before his explosions.

"What?" she asked, looking over her shoulder, confused.

"I don't know how to tie a damn bow!" She turned to face him, her eyebrow quirked, questioningly, but she didn't fight him. "I...I'll just get you a fucking chain," he grumbled, looking down at the ground

and kicking at the dirt. But her mouth fell open, affronted, and she retracted her hands as if to keep the ribbon out of his greedy grasp.

“No,” she cried out. “Don’t!” Her voice faltered slightly as she brought the necklace closer to her and rubbed the silk ribbon between her finger pads. “I...It’s perfect like this...”

If his hands weren’t already tingling before, suddenly they felt like they were on fire.

Shit.

She loved the fucking thing he had given her. To be fair, he had chosen the ribbon purposely- he thought it would be easier to sleep in, if she wanted to. He had picked out a color that he thought she had liked and had made sure it was soft and light, not cold and hard.

But still, seeing her wear it, and hold it, and proclaim so sincerely that it was perfect- it made him feel all weird inside.

“Fine,” he muttered, wiping his hands on his pants furiously and then holding them out, not even needing to communicate further than that. She smiled gratefully and turned her back to him again. “I’m not making it into a stupid bow!”

She laughed. She was doing more of that lately- not just around him, which was good- but, still, a lot around him too. It was still different, still not quite her in the way he remembered it, not uninhibited and full-bodied.

But he liked it anyway.

He cursed his large hands as he took the smooth ribbon from her, trying to avoid touching her neck. He didn’t know why exactly, but the thought made him sweat even more. It wasn’t like he never touched her- they sparred, she hugged him, they’d even wrapped a few minor injuries for each other- she seemed to have moved past a lot of her hang-ups with touch when it came to him.

But still...new kinds of proximity and untested touching always made him nervous. He tied off the ribbon, securing it around her neck, and then untucked some of the whips of her unruly hair out from under it.

“See,” she said, looking over her shoulder. “Was that so hard?”

He snorted and gave her a gentle shove forward. "Come on," he said. "We have to go show up some fucking extras."

She pouted. "Yyeah..."

He raised an eyebrow at her tone. "Figured you woulda been excited about the whole cultural exchange thing."

She shrugged non-committedly. "Not really," she said. "And especially when it interferes with study and Bachelor nights!"

He stopped for a moment that same sensation returning again, somewhat painful and somewhat prickly and pleasant. He tended to run hot, but this dumb fuzzy warmth wasn't part of that.

"Katsuki," she turned to look at him, confused at his pause. "Are you...?"

He shook his head and continued forward. "Fine," he answered curtly, catching up with her in a few strides. She looked at him for a moment, clearly assessing whether or not that was true until he turned a scowl on her.

She rolled her eyes in response and gestured for him to keep walking with her.

He wasn't sure why these odd little confessions from her kept throwing him off. There was no kidding himself, or anyone else, that they were friends. He had all but told her on several occasions that there were few things she could ask of him that he would say no to.

Still, when she said things like that- that she loved the present he gave her, that she wanted to spend time with him, to be with him- it always made his chest feel a little tight. He was an angry asshole. People didn't like being with him. He made sure of that.

But she did.

###

Ochako still couldn't bring herself to doll up. It was something she had yet to be able to bring up with Dr. Shoko because, well, it was steeped in so many things that she didn't even know how to touch. And it wasn't as if those issues were the priority. She would deal with them when she had some of the bigger shit handled.

There was too much fear there- a deep fear- that was hard, almost impossible to name. She had never even kissed anyone before, and the thought of even *that* made her sick with anxiety. She wondered if she would ever feel connected to herself in that way again, or to another person.

She had hardly even begun to explore any type of sexuality in herself, and now she couldn't even think of herself in that way, as a sexual being with a physical body, without her skin crawling, without feeling sick.

But she supposed she didn't need to rush any of that; Dr. Shoko told her she didn't need to rush anything. It wasn't like she was dating anyone. It wasn't like she had a boyfriend or a girlfriend that was waiting patiently on her to decide if she would ever even *want* to kiss another human being in her life.

So, there was no reason to bother with all of *that* , right?

So, while her friends were all getting ready, ready to make an impression on their guests, she was just trying to hype herself up into wearing leggings. Her mother had given her a long soft sweater that went to about mid-thigh. It did hang off the shoulder more than she was comfortable with, but a tank top underneath would help. And shoes, well, Nezu would have to live with her sneakers; she didn't trust a shoe that she couldn't run in.

She wondered if she would care again one day; if she would look in the mirror and want to think the girl staring back at her was pretty.

Beautiful.

Sexy.

It was still- still- a face and a body she felt so little connection to.

*She was trying.*

She straightened the sweater, pulling it down as far as it could. Maybe a scarf would make her feel less exposed.

*She was trying to love it again.*

She dabbed a little concealer under her eyes.

*She was trying to listen to it again.*

A touch of lip gloss.

*She was trying to own it again.*

She tousled a little bit of product into her short hair, messing it in the way Mina had shown her, letting it curl and twist around her ears.

She looked at herself for a moment, trying to understand the girl she saw there looking back at her.

*Trying so hard to love her.*

###

Ochako was trying so damn hard not to laugh.

So hard.

But it was almost impossible as she watched as Iida was very loudly flirted with like that darn, beautiful, sweetheart deserved, and he had no idea what to do with it. The girl, Alyssa if Ochako had heard right, was one of the most beautiful people that Ochako had ever seen up close, friendly and smiling and chatting up their class rep in a refreshingly shameless way.

Ochako decided quickly that she liked her.

“Uraraka...” she jumped slightly at the proximity before turning to see Shoto leaning in close to her, eyes on Iida and Alyssa. “You know I’m not great at reading social cues.”

She opted out of sarcastic denial, doubting he’d pick up on it.

“Is...is that girl sexually interested in Iida?”

Ochako snorted gracelessly into her drink and quickly grabbed for a napkin while Shoto patted her back until she caught her breath.

“Uh...well...I don’t know that I’d say that,” she choked out. “...But she’s flirting with him certainly.” She looked over at them; Alyssa leaned in closer to Iida, listening intently to whatever he was saying. At first glance, Ochako wasn’t sure if the boy even knew, but, on closer inspection, she could see the light blush across his cheeks.

“Right,” said Shoto, then he cleared his throat and rubbed his neck,

sheepishly, looking briefly over his shoulder into the cafeteria.

“Hey,” said Ochako, leaning in closer to him to keep confidence.

“What’s up?”

“I...is...is that young man flirting with Izuku?”

Ochako bit back the small smile before shakily following his gaze to the next table. Deku was animatedly talking to a very attractive student from the American school. And goodness could she relate to the current anxiety that Shoto was feeling, or did, once upon a time. Though Shoto was far more dignified with his jealousy than Ochako was.

“I don’t know,” she said, catching a flicker of worry in Shoto’s eyes that she hurried to disrupt. “What I do know, Shoto,” she said pointedly, not wanting to give away Deku’s feelings- though she couldn’t imagine that the two dummies didn’t have some idea about what the other felt at this point . “You have nothing to worry about.”

She chanced a small comforting grasp of his hand. His eyes flicked down, curiously at the contact, and then back to her eyes. She offered him a reassuring smile. “Uraraka,” he said, voice sinking into a low whisper. “Are...are you flirting with me?”

Ochako blinked once, looked into his completely sincere and slightly curious gaze- as if it would have been fine if she was and he was just trying to learn- and then, suddenly, surprisingly, taking her entirely off guard, she burst into uncontrollable, tear-inducing laughter that sent her doubling over against the table.

She laughed longer than she meant to, probably louder than as well, but when she got going, she couldn’t seem to bring herself to stop because her body was feeling it head to toe, top to bottom, in her soul, belly, and soul.

And she noticed it- almost the same practice that Shoko had taught her when the negative emotions started to rise in her. But also, so different.

She noticed her breathing- or lack thereof- as she laughed herself breathless, like a damn releasing, a seal breaking. It felt a little bit like one more piece being set right.

When she stopped, finally, wiping at her eyes, she noticed that Iida was looking at her, head cocked to the side curiously with a wide grin



of his own, before returning to her conversation. She wasn't looking at Izuku, but if she had been, she would have seen him looking up from his conversation as well, eyes shining with joy.

Had it really been that long since she laughed like that?

"Oh, Shoto," she said, leaning into him slightly, pressing her shoulder to his. "I'm so glad we're friends..."

He looked confused but also seemed to warm at the comment as he pressed his shoulder into her, a tentative, uncertain gesture.

"Me too, Uraraka," he said. "Me too."

###

Katsuki was only half listening as Shitty Hair made friendly with two of the American kids at their table- he missed their names and only vaguely picked up on quirks (something to do with laser eyes and another to do with some singing voice that lulled people into sleep like some fucking Jigglypuff). But of course, Shitty Hair had to be everyone's fucking friend.

He had been eating his weird-ass American food when he heard it- several tables over, so loud it would have annoyed him before. Except now, it almost made him smile into his tea.

It almost felt like the sun.

It sounded like a sigh of relief- he wasn't sure if it was his or hers. He turned slightly in his chair. Her back was to him, but it was clearly something that Half and Half had said- probably not on purpose, knowing him.

But who the fuck cared, as long as it got the job done- as long as it made her laugh like that.

###

On the way back to the dorms, Ochako snuck Deku away from the group he was walking with. She felt light and happy, and she wanted Deku to feel happy, so she tugged him back and away briefly.

“Uraraka,” he said, surprised. “What’s up?!”

“Nothing,” she said, biting her lip to hold back a cheeky grin. “Just thought you’d like to know that Shoto may have been slightly worried that the cute American was flirting with you.”

Even in the dark, she could see Deku blushing, and the small happy smile spread across his face. “Really?” he whispered. She nodded with a casual shrug.

“Just saying!”

Deku didn’t even try to hide his excitement.

“Does that mean- that’s good, right?”

She rolled her eyes and slapped his arm playfully. “Of course it is, silly! He’s jealous because *he* wants to be the one to flirt with you!”

Deku nodded as though he were calculating how to work this new data into his framework.

“Midoriya!”

Deku looked up at the same American- the one that Shoto had been worried about. “Come on! I want to see your notebook.”

“Jeez, Deku,” she said with a wink. “Cleaning up tonight, aren’t ya?”

His blush deepened, stumbling over the objection as Ochako pushed him toward the group. She was about to follow, but then she heard a familiar snort behind her that filled her with warm feelings and affection.

“You’re such a little busy-body.”

She rolled her eyes and waited for Katsuki to catch up with her. “No,” she said. “I’m just giving two clueless angels a little push in the right direction.”

“Tch...Do Pickachu and Mind-Fuck next, they won’t stop flirting with each other in our study group.”

“Awwww...”

He scowled defensively. “Hey, don’t look at me like that!”

“You’re a romantic!”

“You take that back right now, Uraraka!”

She stuck her tongue out. “Uhhh no...” she said, lacing her arm through his.

“What the hell!?”

“What?” she asked, looking up at him. “Now that I know you’re a secret romantic, I was hoping you would walk me back to my room like the gallant gentlemen that you probably read about every night in your shoujo manga.”

He shoved her off of him and sped up his walk in a huff, and she wasn’t sure why; maybe it was her good mood, the serotonin from her laughing fit, perhaps it was the fact that Deku had looked so happy, but she was feeling something new (or old, she wasn’t sure). She was feeling energetic and giddy and playful. So she trotted after Katsuki and jumped onto his back, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Goddammit,” he protested, but all the same, he dropped his arms to hook under her legs and jostled her up so that he could get a better grip, even as he swore at her. “What the hell has gotten into you?”

She shrugged and rested her chin on his shoulder. She felt him shiver slightly, so she tightened her grip around him, hoping to warm him up; it was cold outside after all. “Nothing,” she said. I’m just teasing. “She tapped his shoulder to let him know he could release her, but his arms remained hooked under her legs and continued to walk forward.

“Fucking princess can’t walk to the dorms herself...” he muttered, in a way that could only be called a pretense of “under his breath.”

She snickered and held tighter. “I’ll carry you next time Katsuki.” He snorted as if he wouldn’t dignify that with an answer. “Did you make any new friends?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “I’m already tired of all the extra noise.”

She inhaled slightly; the sweet aroma of burned sugar was like her own lavender candle at this point.

She loved it.

It calmed her.

It settled her.

“I only met a couple,” said Ochako. “Erin and Alyssa are both nice.”

“One of those the ones chatting up Four-Eyes?”

She laughed. “Yes! Alyssa. She’s really nice.” He didn’t respond, having nothing to contribute to the conversation, but she didn’t mind. “Her quirk was pretty cool too! She’s a calculator! A literal human calculator. She can quantify astronomical sums in her head in a second.”

He hummed, letting her know he was listening. She chatted a little longer, expecting him to drop her as they got closer to the dorm. But he mounted the stairs, still not letting her down. Through the common room where a few of their peers were still congregating, though to be fair, no one seemed to find the sight odd.

“Do you think Deku and Shoto are alone somewhere?” she whispered into his ear. His face twisted in disgust.

“Why would you put that image in my head just before bed, huh?”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” she said. “They are are both beautiful! Also, I was talking about their budding romance not anything sordid!”

He scoffed as he walked her the rest of the way down the hall, not releasing her legs until they were outside of her room. She didn’t comment on how he decided to do that without any nagging.

Which meant he wanted to.

Which made her feel good, something she would also keep to herself.

###

“Hey...”

Ochako looked up from her book to a boy, smiling down at her. There

were only 15 American students, but she hadn't spoken to most of them- including this one.

"Hi," she said, in tentative English.

"Mic told us to pair up with someone with a book, so...can I pair up with you?"

She looked down at her book, opened to Henry VIII, and she nodded.  
"Uh...sure!"

He smiled blindingly at her as he sat at the desk closest to her- all charm and swag, dark wavy hair and bright blue eyes. She scooted her book to the edge of her desk as he slid his desk closer.

She swallowed the nerves in her belly.

Be normal.

Be normal.

Be normal.

He was just a boy. His shoulder pressed so close to her was nothing to be afraid of her- the way he leaned in to look at her book shouldn't cause her blood pressure to skyrocket. She closed her eyes and exhaled slowly, trying to calm herself- trying to deescalate the rising tide of emotions.

"You can't control what happens around you," Dr. Shoko had said.  
"But you can control your actions with practice. You can't always control your knee-jerk biological reactions, but you can notice, pay attention, and then rewrite the script."

*You're safe.*

*You're safe.*

Her hands sought out the pendant around her neck, almost instinctively. She traces the edges. Grounding herself. She swallowed, ignoring the way his knee pressed against hers. They were small desks, after all, and the boy was tall.

"I'm Ochako Uraraka," she said. Her English wasn't the best, but he looked like he understood. He smiled at her through messy black bangs.

"I'm Brendan Bassett," he said in fairly competent Japanese. "Nice to meet you!"

"You're Japanese is really good," she said.

"Oh, really?" He looked positively delighted at the comment. "Thank you. I was really nervous about it."

She smiled and nodded. "No, it's really good. Much better than my English."

"What?!" He leaned heavily on the desk, resting against his own forearm as he looked up at her with a casual, easy confidence. "I doubt that. Say something to me in English."

"Uh...like what?"

He laughed- a warm, deep chuckle, eyes still locked on her in a way that made her want to look away. "Say...Brendan, do you want to share my book all week?"

A furious blush rose all the way to her hairline. She looked down, suddenly very flustered and warm and uncertain. And it didn't feel like the good kind of flustered, except for the fact that she could hardly recognize if something was normal, good, or bad- she had no baseline for what was comfortable and what wasn't.

She looked over her shoulder, reminding herself that she was safe. She was in a class of her peers. She wasn't alone with a stranger. She was in a classroom with friends and a friendly hero-in-training who just wanted to share a book.

"I'm sorry," he said, shaking his head, but he didn't look sorry. "That was pushy. I just thought I'd ask." Guilt surged inside of her. Her hang-ups weren't an excuse to be a bad host.

"No," she said; she squeezed her fists together resolutely and looked at him with a smile. "Brendan," she said in careful English, repeating his words. "Do you want to share my book all week?"

He looked at her in fake-surprise. "Ochako," he said teasingly, a familiarity she supposed was normal for American's but unfamiliar to her with someone she had only just met; even Katsuki rarely called her Ochako. "...You flirt! I would love to!" He moved even closer, and that did set her teeth on edge.

Why did he want to share her book?

Why was he smiling so much at her?

Why was he sitting so close?

Alarm bells went off. But her alarm bells weren't normal. Her alarm bells perceived the most random and unpredictable things as threats. She couldn't trust her instincts about what was safe and what wasn't. So, she ignored them altogether.

###

She was surprised by how close Brendan stuck with her all day. She would have assumed that he would be interested in learning about other quirks, hearing someone else describe life at UA, finding other class partners. But all day, through lunch and dinner and all the way back to the dorms- he stayed close.

Chatting away like they were the best of friends.

And in all honesty, as friendly as he was, she was ready to be rid of him. She felt a little guilty about that. He was perfectly nice. But she was eagerly awaiting a text from Katsuki to let her know when he was ready to train.

The perfect excuse to break away from Brendan, who was sharing tales of life in America. Interesting enough, she supposed, but he was so chatty. And his charisma was slightly overwhelming, and she couldn't quite talk her heart rate down. She needed a good run or a sparring lesson.

So she waited for the text expectantly.

But...it never came.

Finally, when she had a chance to break away from Brendan, she texted him.

***Hey! Are we working out today?***

"We are so excited to explore downtown this weekend!" Ochako caught the end of the statement and looked up at Brendan.

“Oh yeah,” she said, trying to reengage. “You guys will enjoy that.”

“You’ll have to show me some of your favorite spots.”

She looked up from her phone abruptly. “Huh?”

“You’re coming too, right?”

Her phone buzzed in her hand; she looked down at the screen.

***Katsuki: I’m working out with Shitty Hair.***

Ochako felt a pang of hurt, which she recognized wasn’t fair. He was allowed to work out with other people. And she imagined that Kirishima gave him a better workout than she did.

“Ochako?”

She looked up, swallowing the disappointment before it showed in her face. “Huh?”

“You’re coming too, right?”

“Where?” she asked, confused.

He laughed and ruffled her hair, an act that was way too familiar for her liking. “Downtown, you airhead!” His voice was nice enough, teasing, clearly not meant to be taken seriously, but still, she didn’t care for it.

She bit her lip, trying to quiet the unease, trying not to read into anything, trying not to wonder if Katsuki was upset with her.

###

When she didn’t respond right away, Katsuki felt a stab of guilt.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to work out with her; it was actually one of his favorite parts of the week. He was just trying to sort out this weirdly intimate relationship that was so fucking difficult for him to define. It had been weird from the start- in its own way- with him being uncertain of why he was so invested. But only recently, he had felt another shift.



Yes. They were friends.

Good friends.

Weirdly close friends.

And as odd as it all was, it hadn't really been complicated; in fact, a lot of it had been pretty clear.

He wanted to be with her.

He wanted to make sure she was well-fed.

He wanted to make sure she was okay, and when she wasn't okay, when her pain was at an 8, a 9, or a 10, he wanted to make it better, to get it to a 5 or below, even if it meant watching some dumb reality dating show with her.

All of that was odd but doable.

But when Uraraka's laugh started to make his chest feel tight, when he found himself seeking out her smile at any given moment in a room, when he found himself hoping she would lean in just a little closer when they did homework or watched TV...things started to feel more complicated for him.

She made him feel just a little quieter- not like he was about to explode into a million pieces. And she looked at him; she looked at him and really saw him. He was a hero. He knew that in every single part of him- but not everyone did; some people still looked at him and expected to see a villain; they could see a future where he was a villain.

But he couldn't be a villain- not when she trusted him the way she did with the most hurting parts of her. She trusted him so much.

Which was why he was keeping his distance right now. Because right now, he felt like a sleazy scumbag when he recognized the small beginning sparks of attraction. At least that's what he thought it was; it felt like the only explanation for the weird way he had felt recently every time she was around.

But even that was difficult to define when it came to Uraraka. If it were just physical attraction, that would be one thing- *that* he could manage and control- but this was different in every way.

Because of all the fucking emotions, and all the fucking trust, the caring, and deep fucking admiration that confused it all. He was her friend, and he truly wasn't trying to weasel his way into anything more, so the attraction panicked him just a little.

But not enough to make him avoid her because she wanted to be around him, and as long as she wanted that, he wasn't going anywhere.

Initially, he had no intention of avoiding her. None whatsoever. Not until he felt the first spark of jealousy that he knew he needed to give her space. Because he could control attraction. He wasn't worried about that becoming an issue- he would never in a million years touch Uraraka without her say-so, no matter what he was feeling.

But jealousy was different. He *could* be an asshole (even to her, he was sure). And he needed to get those feelings far away from her because the last thing she needed right now was her friend to act all weird and jealous and territorial because some American extra was chatting her up for the whole fucking class to see.

It was good.

It was normal for a guy to flirt with a cute girl. And Uraraka deserved a little bit of normal in her life, and she deserved her friend not to be skeeving on her on the sly.

But when she texted him, he felt immediately guilty.

He could have talked to her. He could have texted her like always did. It wasn't as if they had a firm contract or anything, but still, Tuesdays were their training days, and he hadn't even bothered to text her.

And he was sure he had hurt her feelings.

He shook out his wet, freshly showered hair and checked his phone once more. She still hadn't responded- he supposed that was fair; he didn't ask her anything that would prompt a response.

But maybe she hadn't responded because she was too busy chatting with her dumb American.

Katsuki was ready to put the whole thought out of his head, even though he was sure it would plague him all the way to sleep when a knock at the door interrupted his sulking.

He stomped over to his door and opened it, ready to tell Kirishima to fuck off, but he dropped the scowl suddenly at the sight of Uraraka standing in his doorway. From the way her strands of hair clung to her forehead and cheek, it looked like she had just showered too.

She was wearing his sweatshirt.

Wearing the necklace that he gave her.

And that sated the angry resentment just a little bit.

“The hell do you want?”

She held her laptop up shyly, and while he was struck by how damn cute she was, he felt even more guilty because of the way she was holding herself. Like she wasn't entirely sure that he wanted her there, like they weren't past shy at this point. But he had also ditched her without cause...so... maybe she was feeling a bit insecure.

“I thought we could watch the Bachelor tonight...”

He crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. “Why on earth would you think that?”

“Because we want to see how the fight between Misa and Otori ended up.”

He snorted, hating himself that he actually knew who those people were, and stepped aside to make space for her to come in.

“Besides...” she muttered grumpily, making herself comfortable on the bed. “I haven't seen you all day.” She looked at him pointedly, and despite her barbed meaning, he couldn't help but read and be pleased by the subtext there.

She had missed him.

She had missed him today, and that was why she was here.

In his hoodie.

In the necklace he gave her.

That American asshole could kiss his ass.

He shrugged and walked toward the bed.

“Sorry,” he grumbled, sitting next to her. “I thought you’d be too busy with that pretty boy.”

She looked at him, confused for a moment. “Brendan?”

He nodded. “Yeah, you guys were attached at the hip all day.”

She scoffed. “He shared my book and ate dinner at our table.” She scooted back against his headboard and maneuvered her way under the covers, burying her frozen toes there as she opened her laptop.

Katsuki looked at her for a moment...god, she was painfully cute.

“He was flirting with you,” he volleyed back, hoping his tone as neutral as possible. Her eyebrows shot up as if she had just watched him grow a second head.

“No, he wasn’t,” she said with a laugh. His eyes narrowed at the denial as he settled beside her, his legs on the outside of the blanket, using it as a barrier between them. “He was just being friendly-American style!”

His eye twitched in frustration as she typed on her computer, pulling up the video. “No,” he said. “I’m telling you he *was* flirting, and he wasn’t sly about it.”

She scoffed and scooted the laptop onto his thighs so it was closer to both of them. Clearly, she wasn’t as invested in this conversation as he was. She grabbed his wrist and lifted his arm above her head, creating space for her to move closer to him before dropping the arm over her own shoulder.

He should tell her to stop.

It wasn’t that he was uncomfortable.

Not at all.

In fact, he quite enjoyed the closeness. That was a little bit of the problem.

“He was not,” she said, looking up at him with a teasing smile. “Did you see him? He was not flirting with me.” She moved to hit the space bar on her computer to start the show, but he grabbed her wrist, loosely, but enough to stop her movement.

“The hell does that mean?!” She looked up at him, clearly confused,

but he didn't know why; he thought he was pretty clear.

"What's what supposed to mean?" she asked. "Katsuki, if we don't start now, we won't finish before curfew!" She tried to reach past him with her other hand to hit play, but he closed the laptop suddenly.

"Katsuki! What..."

"I'm serious," he snapped, his voice tense with annoyance. "What the fuck did you mean by that?"

She exhaled slowly, clearly annoyed.

Well, he was annoyed too.

"I don't know," she said with a shrug, blinking up at him with exaggerated boredom. Maybe she had been hanging out with him too long; she was getting a little too sassy for her own good. "Which part?!"

"You know damn well," he said; she still hadn't pulled her hand away from his hold on her wrist. He could let go, he supposed, but he hadn't. "When you said, 'did you see him,' as if that was some kind of irrefutable proof that he wasn't flirting with you?"

She sighed and sat up, his arm falling from her shoulder. "Just forget about it, Katsuki," she said, turning to look at him. "It was a joke."

"Why are you lying to me?" he pressed.

"Why are *you* making such a big deal about this?"

"I wanna know why the hell you don't think that fucking pretty boy was flirting with you!"

She let out an angry growl- but it wasn't much of a deterrent. "You're so annoying!"

"Tch...fucking same, Uraraka!"

She rolled her head dramatically before looking at the ceiling. "Ughhh...Fine! I just meant he's...you know!" She motioned dramatically. "And there are plenty of cute girls for him to flirt with here if that was what he wanted to do."

*This is a trap*, his brain screamed at him. A trap, and he was about to fall face-first into said trap. And he was fairly certain she had no idea

she had set one.

“Don’t be fucking stupid,” he said, voice low with embarrassment.

Her mouth formed a tight scowl. “I’m not stupid,” she protested. “You’re stupid! You were stupid all day, and you’re being stupid now! Just tell me why you are mad so we can...”

“If you mention the Bachelor one more time, I swear to fucking God, I’ll explode your damn computer!”

She went up on her knees, pulling away from his grasp so she could look him in the eyes. “And if you mention flirting one more time, I’m going to float your ass into outer space!” She poked him in the chest. “You need to pick what you’re mad about, Katsuki! At first, your mad because I spent too much time with him, and now you’re mad that I don’t think he was flirting with me?!”

“I’m not mad,” he barked. “I’m frustrated that you think he wouldn’t *want* to!”

Not to mention that she apparently thought this guy was soooo hot that he wouldn’t give her the time of day while he was over here feeling all kinds of feelings; something about that felt vaguely insulting, even if she had no idea that it was. He flopped back and crossed his arms, petulantly. “Damn asshole would be lucky as fuck if you gave him the time of day.”

“Ooh, is that all,” she said, rolling her eyes and settling back beside him. “Jeez, Katsuki!”

“Don’t fucking do that, Ochako,” he said through gritted teeth. He knew he shouldn’t take this out on her. He knew her self-esteem was low as fuck most of the time- he knew she existed perpetually on the brink of crushing self-loathing.

He liked to think she was getting better.

But he was mad.

And just a little jealous. But his greater irritation was, honestly, that she thought some loser wouldn’t be bothered with her. But if there was anything that he wasn’t good at, even with Ochako, it was words of affirmation. He had quite squarely set himself as the friend who showed up with action, with being there, but words were still such a struggle for him.

He would rather choke.

But...

Everything was different with her.

"I'm sorry, Katsuki," she said, and he felt a surge of panic. Oh shit. He hadn't wanted her to feel bad. "I guess... look...I know it's frustrating, but I just don't understand why you're getting so worked up. He was flirting with me, he wasn't...why does it matter?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose and inhaled. "Not the point," he said, but he was letting himself calm down a little and trying to explain this in a way that she would understand- a way that wouldn't be summed up *as you're cute and highly flirtable* . "Okay," he said. "If someone told you that I shouldn't be a hero- if they were going on and on about all the reasons that I shouldn't be a hero, I'm hot-headed, violent, loud all of that."

"That's dumb," she said. "You're the best hero I know!"

He barreled right past that kick in the chest to his point. "You'd be frustrated, right?"

She sighed and nodded. "Sure," she said. "Although comparing whether or not a boy thought I was cute to the thing you were literally born to do seems a stretch but..." she shrugged and settled back beside him, tucking herself once again under his arm. "But I see your point."

He hoped that was enough because he wasn't about to open his mouth and tell her how fucking amazing she was, how funny, how badass she was. She fucking dragged herself out of a pit just to crawl up a fucking mountain.

She survived a hell he didn't even want to imagine. She was tough as hell and was still trying to be fucking compassionate, or whatever. It may not be miraculous that she was here (because she worked her ass off), but it was damn impressive.

But he wasn't gonna say any of that because he was Katsuki Bakugo. He looked down to find her picking anxiously at her nail bed; he could see the wheels in her head turning. He rolled his eyes, and tentatively placed his hand in hers, stilling the movement of her fingers. She instinctively grabbed it- the way she sometimes did before she spiraled, gripping and releasing it at a specific rhythm.

“You know I’m not pissed at you, right?” he asked, watching the pressure of her fingers against the back of his hand. She nodded. “I just...you...you should know when, or if, you ever want, any fucking loser would be lucky to...” he shrugged awkwardly. “You know....” He breathed a sigh of relief when she squeezed his hand and interrupted him.

“I know, Katsuki,” she said, looking up at him, her voice sweet and sad. He could tell that she didn’t believe him- not yet anyway. She wasn’t there yet. She was still working on getting healed up, and he knew that it would take more than a jealousy inspired hissy fit from him to convince her she deserved good things; that she deserved the world.

“All right,” he grumbled. “Let’s find out if this fucking idiot is ready to send Misa home- fucking bitch...”

Ochako laughed and nodded happily as Katsuki opened the laptop.

She held onto his hand the whole time.

And he let her.

###

Ochako trusted Katsuki- completely, with everything inside of her. So when he told her that Brendan was flirting with her- her personal feelings aside- she believed him.

She just was confused by it.

She was confused by all of it.

Her own internal panic, her overactive fight or flight response, the anxiety around any conception of herself as a girl, a girl with a body, a sexual being of any kind, was through the roof.

And Brendan was staying close to her.

At the food court.

At the arcade.



And Mina kept giving her a quirky excited smile and knowing nudges. And she didn't resent that. She hadn't told anyone that she was uncomfortable with any kind of attention of this nature. She hadn't talked about it at all.

She didn't know how to.

And Mina was acting like a normal friend- how any normal friend would when a cute guy was giving them attention.

And even though he was going back to America in two days, she would have enjoyed this time a year ago. She would have enjoyed the attention of a cute boy. She would have felt that happy, light feeling that came with that kind of attention- she was sure of it.

She wanted to be a normal girl, blushing at the smiles of a cute boy. But she wasn't. And really, right now, she wanted him to leave her alone; she wanted to chat with a few of the other American girls with them at the mall, to hear about their quirks and their school.

But Brendan was always there, pressed to her side, stupidly close to her, leaning in to whisper when whispers weren't necessary. She supposed he was flirting.

She wanted to be thrilled, flattered; he was nice after all, but still...

"Come on, Ochako!" Brendan grabbed her wrist and pulled her with a lot more liberties than she had given him. "I want a picture with the cute Japanese girl to take home and show my friends." She let out a small noise of resistance, but it flew right over his head.

He was just different than her.

He was from a whole different country.

A whole different culture.

She shouldn't judge him too harshly. She was sure if she came over to his school in the US, some of her behavior would be considered odd too.

But being shoved into a small photo booth with him sent her heart thundering in her chest and made her palms moisten with sweat. She tried to remind herself that he wasn't like Katsuki; he had no reason to feel for her pulse, to note the white-knuckle clench of her fist, or the tightness of his jaw. All stuff Katsuki noticed- but there was no reason

for Brendan to notice.

He was treating her like a normal girl.

She just wanted to tell him- tell him what she wanted, like she had been working on with Dr. Shoko. But the words choked in her, stifled in her throat and she didn't know how to voice them. He opened the curtain and tugged her in, but she felt herself getting dizzy and sick. It was crowded.

"Brendan," she said softly. "It's...it's crowded in here."

He threw his arm over her shoulder. "Oh, you're okay!" He said, jostling her playfully. "It will be over quick! So smile!"

He pulled her close. His arm draped over her shoulder felt so different than Katsuki's, even though the bulk is less weighty. She swallowed and smiled weakly at the camera- unsteady and sick. The light flashed in her eyes, and she blacked out momentarily under the bursts of light. She attempted to detach herself from him, but he held firm.

"Wait," he said, jostling her excitedly. "We have a few more."

She felt herself growing warmer. Every part of her body screaming at her to panic, to fight or freeze or run.

Another flash blinds her.

*"Here comes everyone's sexy, little sister! Give it up, ladies and gentleman!"*

Another flash.

The black bursts of light at the edges of her eyes swarmed with faces and shapes, darkened through haze and smoke.

"One more," he declared, pulling her close. He moved to grab her chin and angle her face upward. And even though she was a hero, even though she was sure she could kick this guy's ass if she wanted to, she froze. She was going to vomit all over him in a photo booth.

She grabbed hold of his wrist- summoning whatever was left of her control before she descended fully into a panic. She tried to push him away but found, somehow, that she couldn't. It was like she was moving her hand through muddy water.

What the hell? Her body suddenly felt very heavy and sluggish.

“Brendan,” she barked, jerking her head back weakly out of his grasp.  
“What the...”

“It’s okay, Ochako,” he murmured, leaning closer to her, bringing his face toward hers. “Just relax.” She fought the weight of her limbs and shoved his hand away from her chin, and when his hand was no longer on her, she felt the sensation slowly return to her extremities.

“What...what the hell did you...?” she blinked furiously, angry tears rising in her eyes, words catching in her throat.

“Oh, calm down,” he said. “You’re so tense.”

He tried to pull her back toward him, but she shoved him away from her, avoiding the brush of his fingers and whatever they had done to her just a few seconds ago- so fast that if she didn’t know he had a quirk, she might have missed it. Her limbs were tingling painfully as they woke up.

“You used your quirk on me,” she sobbed, panic choking in her chest.  
“You...”

“Well, yeah,” he said with a shrug, looking at her closely. He looked almost confused. “Are you alright?”

*What the hell?!*

She felt suddenly ridiculous- stupid- embarrassed. She shoved him away, hard.

“Hey,” he snapped, going from concerned to angry in a moment.  
“What the...”

“You...” she scooted away from him, reaching for the curtain. “I never said you could kiss me.” Her words trembled with rage.

*Why did he think he could?*

*What had she done to make him think that he could kiss her? That she wanted him to kiss her?*

He was nice. Not like Mineta- so she must have done something to hint that she wanted him to kiss her. She stumbled to her feet, ignoring his protests as she stumbled out of the box. She reached for the pictures that shot out of the machine and snatched them up.

She stumbled, almost drunkenly, toward the door.

*What was wrong with her?*

She dropped the pictures in the trash before stepping out into the sunlight.

*It had to be her, right?*

*Her weakness.*

*Her neediness.*

*Her desperation.*

She must be putting something out there.

She hated it.

She hated herself.

She could have kicked his ass, so why didn't she?

She hugged herself as she dropped to a bench and bent at the waist, drawing in deep breathes, her head almost between her knees as she struggled to fill her lungs.

She was...she was slipping...she was falling.

“Ochako?”

She looked up, heaving and pale and red-faced from tears and lack of oxygen. Jirou was standing a few feet from her. Ochako tried to open her mouth and assure her that she was okay, but all that came out was a choked raspy sound.

Wordlessly, Jirou stepped toward her. “I’m going to sit down with you,” she said, her voice low and calm. “Is that okay?”

Ochako nodded and gripped the seat of the bench, and tried to focus.

Her feet- on the ground.

Her toes- wiggling in her shoes.

Her legs – against the bench.

Her palms- gripping the stone bench.

“You’re okay,” said Jirou, soothingly. “I’m here.”

She placed a hand on Ochako's back and made small circles with her palm.

"You have air, Ochako."

Ochako nodded, focusing on her touch. Focusing on the sensations around her, the ones that were not panic or self-loathing or frustrations.

She needed...

She needed...

She held her hand out suddenly, wordlessly, to Jirou, who took it without question.

10.

Ochako pressed one finger into her hand.

9.

Another finger.

8.

Another.

She continued until she had squeezed and released all of her fingers, counting down to ten.

She repeated this silently, three more times, before, finally, she started to settle back into her body, and the air started to come easier.

"I'm okay," she said. "I'm okay."

Jirou didn't fight her on it- which she appreciated.

"Thank you," she said.

Jirou nodded and gently turned Ochako's face toward her, so different from when Brendan had touched her face, and used her other hand to wipe away her tears. "Panic attacks can be a bitch," she said, as she moved her thumb to brush under the other eyes.

"Yeah."

"I used to have them all the time."

That surprised Ochako. Jirou had always seemed so cool to her, so steady and solid.

"What...what helped?"

"Meds," she said honestly. "Meds and music and..." she shrugged. "Coming out to my family and friends."

Ochako raised an eyebrow. How had she not known that? Had she been that self-absorbed?"

"What?! Jirou, I had no idea, I ..."

"Girl," said Jirou with a small smirk. "You have had a lot on your plate; why would you know? I was...while you were gone actually, so..."

"Still," said Ochako, grabbing her friend's hand. "You...I'm sorry. I've been so detached from everyone, and I feel like everything is just passing me by."

"Ochako," she said, her voice gentle. "No one is going to leave you behind. We are all on your team."

Ochako nodded slowly. She knew that. Of course, she did. She knew that. "I'm glad," said Ochako, smiling up at her. "I'm so happy for you. You deserve to be happy."

Jirou smiled and squeezed her hand. "Thanks," she said. "So do you."

Ochako nodded. "I'm...I'm trying..."

They sat in silence for a few minutes., quiet and peaceful while Ochako's heart rate lowered. "Don't tell anyone, okay," she said softly, blinking back her tears. God, she was such a cry baby. "Please."

Jirou turned on the bench, so she was looking directly at Ochako. "Ochako, are you...?"

"It's nothing serious," she assured her. "I just it's...it's embarrassing." Jirou nodded, signaling her to continue. "I...ugh..." Ochako rubbed her face. "You know that American boy, Brendan."

"Yeah," said Jirou, with a nod. "Erin was telling me he has a relaxation quirk."

She snorted. "Well...that's a mischaracterization. It didn't relax..." she shook her head. "It made my body feel like it was filled with sand."

She saw the concern flash in Jirou's eyes, the momentary panic, and Ochako hurried to explain. "No...no...no...not that," she assured. "He's been friendly, and maybe he's been flirting with me?"

"Oh, no, maybe about it, Ochako," said Jirou. "Boy has been flirting with you non-stop."

Ochako bit her lip and looked down, suddenly feeling very ashamed and gross. Everyone knew it except her; maybe she had been flirting back. She clearly had no idea how to read anything anymore.

"Oh," she said. "Then...then I guess he and I just had a misunderstanding."

"Ochako," Jirou's voice dropped slightly in a no-nonsense tone. "What did he do?"

She groaned and hid her face behind her hands. Maybe it wasn't a bit deal? Maybe he had made his intentions clear, and she was just slow? Maybe this was all her fault...

"Nothing really," she said. "He did what flirty boys do, and I'm too dumb and off right now to know...."

"Ochako," repeated Jirou, firm and solid. "I can hear your heart rate from here...you were afraid- are afraid- and that, I promise you, isn't ever normal."

Ochako swallowed. "I'm...I...he wanted to go into a photo booth, which is fine, I guess. He has no reason to think being that cramped up with a boy is hard for me." Jirou waited, clearly knowing that more was coming. "But then he touched my face and..." she felt icky even saying it. "...he relaxed me? Or whatever...and then he tried to kiss me."

Jirou's eyes darkened into a scowl that almost rivaled Katsuki's. "What the fuck?"

"It was short," she said. "He just wanted one for a picture, I think, so I don't think he meant..."

"I don't care if he just kissed your damn hand," growled Jirou. "He used his quirk on you- that's so fucked up, Ochako!"

Ochako exhaled slightly in relief. “Okay,” she said with a nod. “So it’s not my frazzled PTSD brain?”

“No way.”

She slumped back on the bench, a pitiful sight, she imagined. “It’s just so hard to read everything. My body panics if I’m alone with Deku sometimes, so I don’t always know how to...” she groped for the right word.

“Trust it,” finished Jirou with a nod. “It’s hard to trust your instincts when you’re so on edge.”

“Exactly,” said Ochako, feeling overwhelmed with relief at being seen and understood. “So, I just...It felt off, but I didn’t know why, so I just let him flirt. So maybe he thought I wanted...”

“Nope,” interrupted Jirou with a firm shake of her head. “It doesn’t matter if you were or weren’t flirting back with him. He still isn’t allowed to kiss you without asking. And he sure as fuck shouldn’t have used his quirk to do it. That was all on him, Ochako.”

Ochako nodded, taking in a deep, stuttering breath of relief.

“Thank you,” she said. “I just...I felt like it had to be something about me if it- I mean it’s nowhere as bad as what happened to me of course, but I...I’m the common thread, and that makes me think that I must be weak or an easy target.”

“Ochako.” Jirou pressed her forehead into Ochako’s. “You were taken because you were a hero- and that guy flirted with you because you’re cute, and he tried to kiss you without consent because he’s a gross asshole. That’s it.”

Ochako let out a weak laugh and nodded before scooting closer to hug Jirou. “Thank you,” she said. “That...that makes me feel like I’m not going crazy.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to tell anyone,” Jirou asked, holding Ochako close to her.

“I’m sure,” she said. “He wasn’t violent, and he actually didn’t kiss me; he just tried. He’s just a jerk, not a criminal.”

“Well,” said Jirou, looking unconvinced. “Any one of us would be willing to kick a jerk’s ass if you asked us to.” She knew that. “Not



that you can't," added Jirou. "But truly, it would be a gift if you would let us."

Ochako snorted and pulled away, shaking her hands out, as if releasing the remnants of her tension. "No," she said. "I'd rather none of you get suspended."

"Or incarcerated in Bakugo's case," added Jirou with a snort.

Ochako's eyes widened in panic, and she shook her head. "Oh yeah," she said, a little more serious. "Please, please don't tell Katsuki. I... there's no reason for him to get expelled because of some asshole."

Jirou sighed in resignation. "If that's what you want, Ochako, I promise." She stood and offered her hand to Ochako. "Come on," said Jirou. "Let's go get a soft pretzel."

Ochako took her hand and stood with her. "I have never wanted anything as much as I want to get a soft pretzel with you right now."

And she meant it.

###

Every part of Ochako's body ached. She had done a long work out with Shoto and Deku after she returned from their excursion. Shoto was one of her favorites to spar with- he kicked her ass, but the one or two times she got the upper hand had been thrilling. She scrubbed at her wet hair once, throwing her towel into her hamper.

She paused once to look at the mirror, enjoying the sight of the bruise blooming on her forehead from one of Shoto's landing blows. She took a regular beating from Katsuki, sure, but their styles were so different it was like she was fighting with a whole different set of muscles to keep up.

And she had needed a hard fight, ready to work out the tension of the day. And now she was excited to go study with Katsuki. She hadn't seen him all day, and she found it was something she noticed- she noticed days where she saw less of him, felt those days. While she liked to think she wasn't co-dependent or anything, she *could* go without seeing him, but she noticed when she didn't. He was a place

her body and soul naturally sought out at the end of the day- the place she was, of late, most prone to miss.

She moved to gather her books and her computer when she heard a knock at her door. She looked down at her phone, she wasn't late yet, so it wasn't Katsuki. Probably Mina or Deku. She opened the door without thinking and froze, but only for a moment.

She glared at the boy on the other side and moved to slam her door shut, but his arm shot out, keeping it from closing and blocking it with his shoulder.

"Get the hell out of my room," she snapped through gritted teeth.

"Calm down," he said with an eye roll. "You're so dramatic. I just came to talk." He remained outside in the hall, his foot still blocking the door. He wasn't quite forcing himself in, but it was enough-enough to tell her that something wasn't right, and she trusted that.

"About what?" she spat angrily, crossing her arms and glaring at him.

And the asshole had the audacity to smirk at her.

"You're cute when you're angry." She was a hairsbreadth away from seeing red. "What happened back there?" he asked. "I thought we were vibing, and then you freaked out."

"What happened?!" she repeated disbelievingly. "You tried to kiss me!"

"Yeah," he said. "And?"

She was going to yell soon; she felt it, deep inside of her. "And," she continued. "That's enough, isn't it? You tried to kiss me, and you didn't ask."

He snorted. "People don't ask if they can kiss," he said. "In fact, it's considered not sexy."

She sneered. "Well, not by me," she said. "And I didn't want you to kiss me."

"I didn't know that," he said, his voice calm and light. "It's just a kiss."

"Why did you use your quirk on me then?" she asked, crossing her arms stubbornly, eyes shooting daggers.

He shrugged. "You seemed tense," he said. "I was just helping you relax, is all."

She took in a deep breath and expelled it intentionally before speaking slowly. "You immobilized me." Her words were slow and clear. "And then you tried to kiss me." She wouldn't let him twist this. She wouldn't let him gaslight her into thinking it was not a big deal. "What's not clicking here?"

"You're overreacting," he said. "I didn't immobilize you. You just seemed tense."

"Then the appropriate thing for you to do would be to do is ask me why I'm tense, not to use your quirk on me and try to kiss me."

"Look," he said. "I'm sorry." He didn't sound like it; there was a laugh in his voice. "I thought we were having fun hanging out this week, but if I had known you were so damn uptight, I would have picked someone who was a little less work."

She blinked, almost dumbfounded. "What?!"

He grinned down at her. "You know," he said. "We travel a lot, and usually the girl I pick to show a good time on our visits is a lot more appreciative." He crossed his arms and looked down at her. "You got a boyfriend or something?" he asked, looking past her into her room. "If not, I wouldn't mind going real quick, give you the full experience."

He stepped a little closer, his press against the door more insistent.

*Don't be afraid, she told herself. You can kick his ass.*

She knows she can. But it was about getting her body to listen to her, to respond to her brain telling her to fight.

"Get...out," she said, her voice low and trembling.

"Is it the kid with the scar?" he asked. She was going to kill him herself. Her fists trembled. She *could* kill him. And that thought made her freeze even more. "Or the scowly blonde?"

"I'm giving you one more chance to walk away," she said.

"Yeah," he said, rolling his eyes. "Whatever. Not worth it." He removed himself from her door and Ochako breathed a sigh of relief as she moved to shut it. But before it closed, suddenly, his arm shot

out once again, shoving it open with an unexpected force, sending the knob colliding painfully with her elbow as he forced his way into her room.

In a flash, he had a vice grip on her arm, and her body went slack- rag dolling in the practiced way it did when she was touched like this, but his hand held her upper arm tight, keeping her on her feet. Her body, it seemed, knew how weak she was- no matter how much work she did, her body knew how fragile she was- so her body responded this way, to minimize the damage- better to drop then to fight when she knew she would lose.

“By the way,” he said, pulling her close. “I wasn’t assaulting you or anything.” His eyes moved over her face, appraisingly. “Trust me- if I wanted to do that, I could have.”

He dropped her arm, and she stumbled back out of his reach. He shoved his hands in his pockets and stepped away, calm, casual, and smiling. He walked away, leaving her shaking and terrified in the middle of her room.

###

Katsuki knew something was wrong as soon as she opened the door. He also knew she was trying, poorly, to hide it. But she was paler and wasn’t eagerly showing off her hard-earned bruises from her sparring session with Icy-Hot. Lately, she enjoyed debriefing fights with him, even recreating certain moves and attacks and getting his advice on how to respond, evade, or attack.

But today, she jumped right into studying; well, half-studying. She was more anxiously nodding along, clicking her pen and trying not to smile.

And he hated it.

He hated her fake smile.

Since when did she use that on him? Like he was one of those fucking extras who she felt that she had to perform for.

It was irritating.

But he reminded himself before he got too worked up that her emotions were hers. Not his. And while he had a very naturally demanding personality, he purposely curbed it around her, knowing that her boundaries were a little more tender than most people, and when she chose to flex them, even with him, he had to let her.

But fuck- he hoped it wasn't permanent- that fake smile.

They made it about 45 minutes before she closed her book and finally looked at him; weary, sad, and with some of that old fear. It didn't live in her eyes in the way it used to, but it was still there on occasion.

"I had a bad day," she said simply. "You can keep studying, but I just... can I just hang out here for a little?"

She was asking- as if he'd say no- it must have been a bad day for her to feel so insecure.

"Whatever you need," he said with a nod. She shuffled until she was under the blanket and then cuddled up as close as she could get to him. Another sign that something had happened; she was particularly grabby on bad days, drawing something from his closeness and warmth.

"You good?" he asked, chewing on the cap of his pen, eyes fixed on the notes in his lap. She sighed and pressed into his ribs.

"No," she said because they didn't lie to each other. "But I don't want to talk about it right now," she added.

Because they didn't lie to each other.

"That's fine," he said, lifting his arm and draping it over her. He studied for another hour before the position grew uncomfortable. But her grip across his torso communicated she wasn't quite ready to let go yet. So, he sunk deeper onto the bed and into his pillow. She sighed sleepily, contentedly, like she had been waiting for him to finally finish studying.

Spoiled brat. She lay her head on his shoulder with practiced ease, and he could feel the tension leaving her body beneath his hand pressed between her shoulder blades.

And it was always- always-something that humbled him in a way that he knew he needed- in a way he didn't realize that he could be

humbled.

His hands were explosive.

They were weapons, capable of profound devastations and destruction. They leveled buildings on the regular.

But, as he watched her ease into him- he was beginning to see them in a different light, and somehow, no less heroic.

###

When Ochako woke blearily at 1 am, Katsuki was gone. Well, not gone, he was sleeping on his little couch where he always moved on the three times that she had fallen asleep in his room. She wanted to tell him that she didn't mind, but she also knew it could be as much for his comfort as for hers. They were technically breaking rules by her being there at all something he typically didn't do.

She stood quietly and made her way over to the sleeping hero. She watched him for a moment, tucked awkwardly on his couch.

She didn't make a practice of watching him sleep, but she couldn't help but linger for a moment, to appreciate the trust he showed her just by letting her see him like this. Katsuki didn't relish any type of vulnerability, so she didn't take it lightly that she saw that forehead unfurrowed and his jaw not set in a stubborn sneer.

She wondered if he knew how important he was to her- how much he meant to her, how utterly beautiful, and interesting, and wonderful she found him.

How much she loved him.

She reached out a hand and tentatively pressed it to his palm, activating her quirk. She floated him just enough for her to pull him slowly, lightly, to his bed. Thankfully, he didn't wake as she released him against the mattress, but his hand did curl lightly around hers, the one that she was using to guide him to the mattress.

Instinctively.

Reaching out even in his sleep to make sure she was there. She gave it

a reassuring squeeze before she quietly made her way back to her room.

## Chapter End Notes

I am so excited for the next chapter- Ochako kicks ass and we finally get a moment between her and Aizawa where she is able to hash out her issues.

Thanks again so much for reading!

# What Makes A Hero

## Chapter Summary

Brendan gets his. Ochako finally talks to Aizawa, and Katsuki isn't confused about at least one thing.

## Chapter Notes

CW: Brendan is garbage and he gets his. To top off this garbage human, he is also homophobic (no slurs are used, but is implied and it pisses Ochako off).

"I do not care for this."

Ochako laughed and looked up at Shoto from where she was lying on her belly in the grass. It was the first sunny day in a long time, so Ochako was going to take full advantage of that.

"What?" she said, kicking her legs up behind her and resting her chin in her hands. He was sitting a few feet away from her, his back leaned up against the tree as he ate his lunch, his legs sticking out stiffly in front of him as if he had never relaxed a day in his life. "The sun or my company?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You know which one," he said reproachfully.

She grinned up at him teasingly. "Deku will be fixed up soon. Recovery girl won't take long with a jacked-up shoulder. So, you're not stuck with me for too long." He rolled his eyes, not dignifying her comment with a response. "Speaking of," she said, narrowing her eyes scrutinizingly. "This is my perfect chance to give you the "you better not break my best friend's heart" speech." Shoto's chopsticks froze a moment away from his lips as if waiting for her to continue. "I mean, Deku's stronger than me, but I'm pretty scrappy!"

"I know," he said, rolling his shoulder theatrically as if she had done sustaining damage to him in their last spar.

"Oh, you're fine," she said, slapping his foot playfully. "Besides," she continued, sitting up onto her knees and snatching a slice of apple from his box. "I'm just teasing. You and Deku are great for each other."

His brow furrowed thoughtfully at her words. "How so?"



The question surprised her- was he feeling insecure, or did he really not know. "Well, you just both seem to really get each other," she said. "You guys communicate without even saying a word. It's spooky!" She laughed, but when his expression turned quizzical, she quickly added. "But really lovely." He chewed on her words for a moment. "Plus, you guys balance each other out. He needs someone practical, with their feet on the ground, and you need someone who looks at you the way he does."

He cocked his head to the side, like a curious cocker spaniel, looking her straight in the eyes in a way that she's not sure he ever had before, as if she were speaking truth to the mysteries of the universe that Shoto couldn't quite get a handle on.

"How?" he asked.

Ochako couldn't hold back her soft smile as she tugged her knees up close to her chest. "Like..." she thought for a moment. She had seen the look many times but struggled for how to define it now. "Like...he could look at you forever and never get bored."

"That's...irrational," he said, but the tone was not convincing and didn't hide the flush on his neck or the subtle changes in his tone that indicated that he was more than pleased with her observation.

"That's how it is sometimes," she offered with a shrug. "But you... you've earned that, Shoto. You deserve someone who cares about you like that. Not your name, not your quirk. Just you."

He looked at her for a moment before speaking. "I had thought you were in love with him once."

A blush and shy smiled bloomed across her face. "I'll always love Deku," she said. "And yes, I had a crush on him first year, but...I think maybe I was just confused because, well, he has a way of provoking undying belief and devotion. When it's your first time feeling that as a teenage girl, you can see how that could be easily mistaken for love."

He smirked and nodded. "It's annoying."

"So annoying," she agreed.

He handed her another bite of his apple. "You know," he said, his voice tense and awkward, liking wading into unfamiliar and shark-infested waters. "You deserve all of that as well, Ochako."

She smiled, and she meant it because even if she didn't know what that meant, it meant so much coming from him, enough for her to be honest in that moment. "I...I don't know if I can," she said.

"Hmm?" He looked at her in honest confusion.

She bit her lip- she hadn't really talked about this with anyone. Not even with Dr. Shoko. But there was something about the honest way that Shoto was that made her feel like she could be honest too. "I think...love, well at least love in *that* way, may require something I don't have anymore."

"Sexual attraction?"

If it had been anyone else, she would have been near tears, but there was just something about the vault that was Shoto Todoroki, calm and cool no matter what, that made it feel direct- and not so overwhelmed by emotions. And she was always overwhelmed with emotions, so it felt nice to talk like this sometimes.

"Yes," she said with an honest nod. "That's part of it. And I absolutely know that it's possible to have valid and good relationships without that, even romantic relationship without that. I just..." she shook her head. "For me, I can't imagine ever trusting someone that much." She could see herself feeling attraction again- one day, but anything else sent her spiraling down a freezing black hole of fear and nervous sweats; it made her feel physically ill.

"It makes sense given your trauma," he said. "According to the literature, that is."

"Literature?"

He nodded. "Yes," he said. "I found that I didn't naturally know how to navigate the experience of my quasi-boyfriend's best friend without outside help. So Bakugo and I have exchanged a few resources."

She opened her mouth to say something and then closed it, overwhelmed and confused. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why does Bakugo have literature?"

It made sense coming from Shoto, but she felt like she would have noticed if Katsuki was doing outside reading. It simultaneously

embarrassed her and overwhelmed her with gratitude.

“Oh,” he said. “I assumed you knew. I think it’s due to his studious nature, that, or his ridiculous competitiveness. He may be an asshole, but he does his research.”

Research.

On her?

She felt a little like crying. And she wasn’t sure what was at the root of it. “Uh...wow,” she said, looking down at her knees and away from Shoto. “You...neither of you had to do...”

“Of course we did,” he said. “Those things don’t come naturally to us in the way they do for you and Izuku. And...he wanted to be the best for you.”

Well, when he put it that way, it settled in her spirit just a little different. It wasn’t that she was an experiment, a specimen that he wanted to study. He wanted to be the best like he always did.

He wanted to be the best for her.

When he didn’t have to be.

“I...he...he shouldn’t put himself out,” she said, shaking her head. “He’s so busy with...”

Shoto snorted, almost derisively. “His practices in empathy and caring have only made him a better hero.” He said it resolutely like there was no room for argument. “Bakugo from first year, who wanted to be number one at any cost? He didn’t stand a chance of breaking the top twenty. But now...” he shrugged. “Well, who knows.” He looked at her with an overwhelming understanding in his eyes. “Besides, you’re certainly worth it to him.”

She smiled, sheepish, and embarrassed. “Thanks, Shoto.”

His brow furrowed slightly. “You don’t believe me?” She opened her mouth to answer, to lie, and then looked away. “You will,” he said, again with that comforting certainty. Somehow contradicting her worst beliefs about herself without invalidating her experience.

She opened her mouth to say something, to divert to something lighter, when a voice broke through their peaceful moment.

“There you are!” Shoto didn’t always read cues well, but she supposed there was nothing to miss about the flash in her eyes when she heard *that* voice. “Been looking everywhere for you, ‘Chako.”

She balked at the nickname and looked over her shoulder at Brendan crossing the grassy lawn from the cafeteria. Shoto looked from her to Brendan, obviously confused by the dissonance between their two postures- Ochako was obviously tense and angry while Brendan was calm and smiling.

“What?” he said. “You’re not talking to me? I’m leaving tomorrow; the least you could do is say goodbye after being so rude to me.”

Ochako went up to her knees but kept her back to him. “Shoto,” she said, gathering up her stuff. Shoto was looking at her, searching for understanding. “Shall we go see how Deku is doing?”

He nodded wordlessly. Even if he didn’t understand, he would do what she asked him.

“Oh, real mature, Ochako...”

Shoto’s eyes narrowed, clearly understanding some part of that particular condescending tone, but Ochako shook her head, silencing him. “Let’s go.” They both stood, and Ochako hooked her arm through Shoto’s, honestly uncertain if it was for her sake or for his. She had been so mad at herself last time for not punching Brendan in the face. And now, her arm linked through Shoto’s was the only thing keeping her from doing just that.

She *knew* she could take him.

But she had frozen, completely frozen, back in her room.

She walked with Shoto past Brendan. His smile faltered slightly, and she saw the traces of something more sinister beneath it. That thing that she imagined he kept on a leash, hidden behind sweet smiles and twinkling eyes, that he had shown her just a glimpse of back in her room.

“Honestly,” he called as she passed, an all-too pleased tone to his voice as if he had found her button and couldn’t wait to push it. “I’m glad you didn’t let me.” He called it out over his shoulder, and while vague, his tone left little to the imagination even for someone like Shoto. She could feel him tense beside her, beneath her palm. She continued to walk forward, silently and bodily willing him to move

with her and away from Brendan. She was relieved when he did.

She didn't want either of them to waste any time on Brendan. He would be gone tomorrow. There was no reason to think about him.

"I mean, who knows what you picked up in that place."

Fuck.

This time she didn't have time to react. Shoto did first. He whipped around, snarling and all but blazing with fury. Lucky, she was still holding onto his fire side, likely the only thing keeping the flames at bay. But Brendan just snickered with the cool confidence of someone who got away with just about anything and didn't think that was going to change any time soon.

"Shoto," said Ochako. "Please..."

"Honestly," Brendan continued, apparently with a death wish. "I'm surprised they let you back into UA." Even though his voice was calm, she could see the hatred in his eyes. She had embarrassed him. Scorned him. Rejected him. A capital offense, it seemed, as far as Brendan was concerned. "People paid to have sex with you, right? At least, according to the articles and online message boards."

A low, deadly growl rose from Shoto's chest, but she kept her hand firmly pressed into his bicep.

"Doesn't that make you a...prostitute?"

Surprisingly to the two boys present, but especially to Ochako, she laughed. And not the kind of laugh that was used to hide tears or deflect from feelings. But as if she was laughing at someone not to be taken seriously. Someone too silly and ridiculous to be bothered with. And that only pissed him off more.

"Ahh, yes," she said with a mocking drawl. "Prostitute- the insult of misogynists everywhere. Hate to break it to you, I imagine most prostitutes are a hell of a lot more heroic than you." His smile dropped entirely, curling into a sneer. "Come on," she said, tugging at Shoto. "Let's go, Sho."

But Shoto remained unmoved. He was looking at Brendan with murder in his eyes. "It's okay," she assured her friend.

“It certainly is not,” he growled, his fists clenched tight.

No, it wasn’t okay. The guy deserved an ass-beating, but right now, she was too distracted by her own strength, her own badassery. There was a hell of a lot she felt like shit about, a lot of guilt and a lot of self-doubts, but Brendan’s words didn’t poke at a raw wound.

Not an entirely healed wound either.

But not a raw one.

It was amazing to see the signs of that resilience that Dr. Shoko was so intent on her building.

And she found that she cared so little about this man- child that she barely felt the prick of his barbs. At least today.

And that wasn’t nothing.

“Shoto,” she said, her voice assuring. “He is talking out of his ass.” Her gaze slid from Shoto to Brendan. “Because...” she continued. “If he really knew what happened.” She turned to face Brendan more fully, unafraid and certainly not frozen.

Not this time.

She could beat his ass.

But she wasn’t going to.

Not because she was frozen, but because he didn’t have any kind of power over her.

“If he really knew what I survived...” she was talking to Shoto but looking at Brendan. “I can’t believe he would be stupid enough to talk to me like that.”

She cocked her head to the side- a powerful threat in her words. And maybe Brendan did know. Maybe he had done his research about what happened in that place because, for a moment, he faltered, and fear replaced his dismissive smirk. Finally, he rolled his eyes.

“Whatever,” he muttered. Ochako felt Shoto relax ever so slightly. Good. They could walk away. Brendan would leave tomorrow, and everything would go back to normal. “This trip was a total bust as it is. I’m not wasting what time I have left on you and that...”

Ochako heard the word.

So did Shoto.

She heard the word, that awful, hateful word about the wonderful, beautiful human next to her- the one who had researched trauma so he could be a better friend, the one who had taken care of Deku when she couldn't.

She heard the word, and she couldn't breathe.

She couldn't think.

She heard Shoto sigh, annoyed, beside her. "Ochako..." there was a warning in Shoto's voice, a silent plea, the same warning that had been in her voice earlier when she begged him to stand down when she had been on the receiving end of Brendan's wrath.

Unfortunately, the sound of Brendan's jaw cracking beneath her fist was louder.

###

Katsuki was minding his own damn business, eating his lunch in the common room, when Shitty Hair burst through the door like a kid in a candy shop, a wide grin on his face.

"Ya'll," he yelled into the common room. "There's a fight outside the cafeteria!"

"Tch...so," said Katsuki. "Someone's always fighting around here."

"It's Uraraka," he all but squealed.

Well, Katsuki's attention was effectively caught. He dropped his sandwich and looked up at Kirishima. "She winnin'?"

"Looked like it," he said. "I came to get you guys before someone comes to break it up!" He turned and ran back outside, having fulfilled his duty as town crier. Katsuki rolled his eyes and set his plate aside. He would go have a look. He wanted to know why Uraraka would be beating the hell out of someone. Four-Eyes had already blown out the door as soon as Kirishima announced it was a fight, which meant it would be broken up soon, and he'd like to see her get a hit in or two.

"Wonder who she's fighting?" mused Mind Freak, who was joining

Jiro and Pikachu as they moved toward the door.

“God, I hope it’s the kid with the date rape quirk. He deserves to get his head beat in.”

Katsuki wasn’t sure he was meant to hear that. But he did. He definitely heard it, and suddenly, he was moving much quicker toward the door. He grabbed Jiro by the shoulder, and he could see her grow pale as if she had just realized what she had said.

“What the hell do you mean by that?”

“Shit,” she said, covering her mouth.

“What do you mean by that?” he repeated through gritted teeth.

“I...”

He didn’t give her time to answer before he was blasting out the door. They didn’t have to go far, as several of the students leaving or going toward the cafeteria had been stopped by the fight and gathered around, apparently enjoying the show. He heard Pinky’s voice shout out over the ruckus.

“Kick his ass, Ochako!” He doubted very much that Pinky knew what they were fighting about, but their class was nothing if not loyal. It didn’t matter why they needed a body buried- their class would be there to hold the shovel.

But Katsuki was feeling a little more panicked, and he was ready to throw himself right into the fight. It wasn’t that he thought she couldn’t handle the asshole; she handled Katsuki on a regular basis, so he knew she wouldn’t have any trouble with this prick. He hadn’t been really worried about it until Earjack made her comment.

*That* could change everything.

But before he could even think about jumping into the fight, Icy-Hot grabbed his arm. “I wouldn’t,” he said, watching the fight calmly.

“I don’t give a fuck what you would do,” spat Katsuki.

“She’s got it,” he assured as if Katsuki didn’t know that. “I would have jumped in from the get-go if this asshole was even remotely a threat. Besides,” he cocked his head to the side and watched Ochako land a hard kick to Brendan’s chest, sending the guy gasping and stumbling



backward. Icy-Hot's eyes lit up happily, watching the fight with a kind of affection. "It's nice. No one has ever beat up a bully for me."

Katsuki rolled his eyes before taking in the whole fight, and immediately felt at ease. From the way the dick-hole was swinging and charging, it was a fight to him, but from the way Ochako danced in and around him, it was clear for her it was a spar, almost playful, if not for the slight edge of rage in her eyes.

"She could've activated her quick like 20 times," said Icy-Hot, leaning in toward Katsuki like he was the commentator on a tv fight.

Katsuki laughed. So she was doing what some of those pros *thought* he was doing when he fought her in the Sport's Festival- the difference was night and day.

She was toying with him.

"What set her off?" asked Katsuki, eyes still locked on her, clenching his fist and shaking it excitedly when she dodged a quick punch, grabbed the kids wrist, and flung him to the ground violently.

"Hell yeah, Uraraka," screamed Shitty Hair, grabbing onto Tape-Face's shoulder and jumping up and down excitedly. "Drop him like a morning dump!"

"Uraraka, please, I implore you," called Glasses. "This isn't appropriate behavior from a UA student."

Icy-Hot casually threw out the explanation, including the slur that the dick had called him, to Glasses and to the whole group. The American yelled, angry and hate-filled, but Ochako seemed positively unaffected by his blustering, landing a hard punch to his already bruised jaw, as if reminding the kid why he deserved an ass-beating in the first place. Upon hearing the cause of the fight, angry shouts rose up in their numbers, and more than just Katsuki was spoiling to join the brawl, with Icy-Hot looking the least put-off, but he supposed that was consistent with their class as well.

Taking shit wasn't a problem for any of them.

Standing by while one of their own took shit, that was something else entirely.

"Destroy him, Uraraka," cheered out Cellophane. "You magnificent goddess!"

“You done yet, Brendan?” asked Ochako, a wicked smirk on her face that truly made his heart feel something like pride. Like he wanted people to know she trained with him. That was an unfamiliar feeling, but not surprising. “Because I’m getting bored.”

Pretty Boy’s eyes burned with a disgusting kind of rage and resentment- a look that really didn’t sit well with Katsuki. Ochako was clearly holding back. She wasn’t trying to hurt the guy seriously. Hell, she hit Katsuki harder than she did this guy, but the American almost looked like he would hurt her bad if he could get away it. Katsuki knew that look. There was nothing quite like the rage of a small man with a shattered ego.

And every time Ochako played with the guy, his ego shattered a bit more.

“Fuck you,” spat the pile of shit. “You fucking whore!

And just like that, the line that separated a slightly contentious fight with the peer-to-peer courtesy and expectation that classmates not interfere got completely obliterated in the same way it had for Ochako when she had heard the American insult her friend. The whooping and hollering that accompanied any fight turned into angry barks and yells of protest.

But even as Katsuki moved to beat the shit out of the guy, or melt his face off, he wasn’t sure which one would be most satisfying, Ochako body blocked him.

He would have been frustrated if he weren’t too busy being impressed by how fast she was getting.

Because somewhere in that span of time of seeing him move to intervene and running to block him, she had activated her quirk on the asshole. “This is for your own good, Brendan,” she called as she tossed him weightlessly into the air and out of the murderous reach of her classmates.

“Let me down,” he screamed, kicking and thrashing and flailing.

But she ignored him and turned to Katsuki, looking up at him almost sheepishly.

“What?” she asked, feigning ignorance.

“Don’t what me,” he snapped, putting his knuckles under her chin to

raise her face up so he could give her a quick once over.

“Please,” she said, pushing his hand away. “He didn’t get a hand on me.” She added an impish wink at that, and he felt his mouth go dry.

“That was entirely unnecessary, Uraraka,” said Icy-Hot. “And hypocritical, might I add. He said far worse to you, and you told me I wasn’t allowed to hit him.”

“The fuck did he say to you?” snapped Katsuki, looking up to see the kid still floating slowly, really slowly, actually. He knew she had been working on that for a few weeks, the incremental changes as opposed to entirely eliminating the effect of gravity altogether.

She sighed and shrugged. “Nothing,” she said. “He was trying to get a rise out of me.” She followed his gaze to the livid balloon.

“Apparently, it worked.” She offered the last bit placating, like a joke she was trying to use to deflect.

It didn’t work.

It wasn’t an answer.

But he wouldn’t push- at least not here.

“Uraraka!”

She turned. “Oh, hey, Iida!”

“While I appreciate you standing up for a classmate.” He said it like it pained him, like every fiber of his rule-following body hated it but didn’t know how to scold her. “If you would.” He gestured upward, and Ochako patted his arm affectionately.

“Will do...” She stepped away from them and looked up. “Brendan,” she called, her tone making it clear that she wasn’t done fucking with the kid, and it was a fucking delight to watch as far as Katsuki was concerned. “If I let you down will you apologize to Todoroki?” He growled something under his breath. “What was that,” she called back?

“Fucking, yes!”

“You better apologize to him.”

The gathered students snickered, and Katsuki could see the extra’s face turn redder and twisting with even more hatred.

“And to all of the LGBTQIA + community,” shouted Jirou, throwing her arm over Ochako’s shoulder, who nodded and looked back up.

“Right, that too,” she added back.

“Fucking fine, just let me down, you bitch...”

“Oi,” yelled Katsuki. “Call her a bitch one more time, and you’ll be writing that damn apology because I’ll be strangling you with your own fucking tongue.”

“He’s not lying,” called Shitty Hair. “He’ll do it!

“All right,” said Ochako, steeping her fingers. “I’m gonna let you down.”

She concentrated hard so she could focus on the incremental lowering, so he didn’t fall straight into the ground and break his skull- she was far too merciful as far as Katsuki was concerned. He also noticed the way she stood in front of him as if to make sure he didn’t follow through with his promise.

A good idea.

But this was Ochako’s fight, and she had it well handled. He liked to fight, and he typically didn’t hold back, but he didn’t like when people intervened with his confrontations either, so he would extend her the same professional courtesy.

When Ochako had successfully delivered the extra to the ground, he went down dizzily to his knees, unfamiliar with the sensation of coming out zero-G before staggering to his feet.

“Well,” said Ochako, her hands on her hips, her almost humorous glare and posture belying her true fierceness. The asshole just sneered at her before turning around and walking away, his whole body shaking with fury. “Hey,” yelled Ochako, taking a step toward him, but Icy-hot grabbed her arm.

“Please,” he said with a shake of his head. “Truly, I don’t need an apology from him.”

Ochako sighed. “Fine,” she said. “Then let’s go.”

The crowd had already begun to disperse, with a few of the Americans and some of 2-A lingering around to get answers about what caused it.

Katsuki hated the idea of letting the idiot off the hook as much as Ochako seemed to, but he supposed that was her prerogative, along with Icy-Hot's.

And if she was done with this fight, then so was he.

Katsuki turned with her to walk away, something that that fucking dickwad had no idea he was lucky enough to get. But guys like that were stupid when they were embarrassed.

When they felt humiliated, they couldn't think straight. And the sound of people's strangled, hurried protests from behind them told him that this kid's bad decisions would have dire consequences. Katsuki spun around at the feeble warnings- his well-honed instincts activated at the sound of hurried steps in the grass and gravel behind them.

And this kid was lucky- as lucky as someone could be who was about to be on the receiving end of an AP shot to the dick- that Katsuki's reflexes were freakishly fast. Since the fuckwad couldn't get his hands on her to use his quirk, and he clearly couldn't take her in a fair fight, he had sunk to desperate measures.

Attacking her when her back was turned, a rock clutched tight in his fists. And Katsuki saw fucking red because she could fight her own battles, but her back was turned, and she was his friend; because he would fucking kill for her.

###

It happened so fast, and Ochako was distracted by Kirishima excitedly hopping around her, vacillating between compliments and questions. She should have been paying attention, but she also thought, as pissed as Brendan was, that he would not be stupid enough to push this fight. He couldn't take her when it was just the two of them; no way would he push it with her whole class gathered around her.

Apparently, she had underestimated the wrath of a man-child scorned.

And she immediately felt panic, felt the pin drop change in the air as a deathly silence fell over everyone. She was wedged between two bodies. She slowly looked up at Katsuki, who was standing right in front of her, one hand gripped tight on one of her shoulders, his other arm reaching over her shoulder behind her. His jaw was twitching, his eyes narrowed in a cold, murderous rage that almost made Ochako flinch.

“Fuuuuck,” she heard Kirishima whisper, resigned and knowing there would be no way he would

No one had moved yet. Slowly he let go of her shoulder and reached past her with his other arm. She swallowed and looked over her shoulder at the boy standing on the other side of her. His arm was reared back, holding a rock.

At a hero school?

Bold of him.

Though he didn't look so bold right now. If anything he looked like he had pissed his pants, suddenly frozen as if he realized just now the consequences of his decisions made in the heat of the moment. One of Katsuki's hands was gripped obscenely tight around his wrist, holding it in place. Slowly, viciously, Katsuki extended his other hand toward Brendan and held it out palm up, and then squeezed Brendan's wrist so hard, the boy let out a pathetic whimper as his knees buckled and his fingers loosened, dropping the rock into Katsuki's waiting palm.

Katsuki hadn't even used his quirk yet and the boy was already shitting bricks.

“Fuck, I'm so sorry...” Brendan breathed; she could feel the panic in his voice. Warranted, but all it did was coax a lethal, toothy grin from Katsuki.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

She needed to get him under control.

She was legitimately afraid. Not for Brendan, Brendan could go fuck himself for all she cared. But for Katsuki- she did not want Katsuki to get kicked out of UA for literal murder. She'd have to go visit him in prison, and that would just be depressing on all sides.

The rock exploded in Katsuki's palm, right in front of Brendan's face.

She could see Kirishima, wide-eyed, and tense; Shoto was frozen, looking and waiting to see what would happen next. Brendan tried to pull away again, but Katsuki's grip was unforgiving and unrelenting.

“Katsuki,” she whispered, trying to keep him calm, but that was a losing game.

He was gone, his brain running through a thousand ways to make Brendan cry like a bitch. She was shoved out of the way, and Katsuki twisted Brendan’s arm so hard that she was afraid he might snap it in two, which might have been his intention.

Ochako dropped to her knees and pressed both palms firmly to the ground, pouring all of her concentration, all of her practice into the pull and push of gravity around her, manipulating her own gravitational field and all the bodies in her sphere.

She was not gonna let him get kicked out of school over this.

She wasn’t going to let him ruin his hero career before it barely began.

Not for her, and certainly not over Brendan.

Katsuki was flung back. He swore loudly as he unexpectedly jerked off the ground and sent flying. He was fairly used to Zero-G, but it was rarely so abrupt.

Simultaneously, she increased the pull of gravity on Brendan, keeping him rooted to the ground so he couldn’t move. She was pretty sure he wasn’t stupid enough to keep fighting after Ochako saved his ass, but she couldn’t be sure.

Then suddenly, abruptly, terrifyingly, she felt it.

She felt cold.

Vulnerable.

Stripped down.

Alone.

She heard Katsuki yelp in protest as he fell; she saw Brendan slump into the ground, exhausted before pushing up onto his hands.

Panic coursed through her, dizzying and overwhelming.

Some part of her knew- of course- the reason for her quirk suddenly being sapped from her body. Her mind knew that Aizawa had heard there was a fight and came to break it up.

Her mind knew that her teacher was somewhere behind her.

Her mind knew it.

But her body didn't.

All her body knew was that her quirk was gone. And it felt hallow and empty and defenseless. Her fight had been good, fun even. And now she felt helpless.

Just as helpless as she had in that cage.

She turned, her body seized once again by that familiar feeling of fighting for her life, of clawing desperately for power. She lashed out wildly at her red-eyed teacher, but his scarf whipped out and restrained her before she got too close.

She wasn't sure what the sound was that ripped out of her, but it was loud and feral and dripping with every ounce of anger she had inside of her. "Give it back, you asshole," she screamed, panicked and twisted in his scarf. "Give me back my quirk! Give it the hell back right now! Right fucking now!"

Hot tears sprung behind her eyes, but she tried desperately to swallow them.

"Not until you calm down," said Aizawa, unphased by her tone or language. She gritted her teeth and turned a vicious gaze on him, meeting his red-eyes with hers, and even if hers were a warm brown, they were far more terrifying than Aizawa's in that moment. "Everyone else, get to class!"

Ochako was trying to catch her breath but breathing through her tight jaw was proving difficult; trying to breathe was impossible when all she wanted to do was scream at the man, to do something, ANYTHING, to make him hurt as much as she did right now; to make him as afraid as she was right now.

"Aizawa-sensei," said Shoto, walking up to the teacher, disregarding his command to leave, with Katsuki close behind. "The American was the instigator," he said. "He called me a homophobic slur and said some truly despicable things to Uraraka."

"You fucking heard her," barked Katsuki, considerably less calm than Shoto, his hackles raised like an angry dog, bent in an offensive posture. "Give her back her fucking quirk!"



“I will as soon as...”

“I’m not going anywhere,” growled Katsuki, his eyes going to Ochako. He knew her well enough to have some idea of what she was feeling and knew the panic mounting inside her. “Get your fucking web off of her and give her quirk back; she’s not a fucking rabid animal that you have to restrain.”

“It’s fine, Katuski,” she said, her eyes locked on her teacher, somehow more angry at him than she was at Brendan. There was always something simmering inside of her when it came to Aizawa, but now it was boiling over fully.

Katsuki remained firm, his arms crossed over his chest, staring Aizawa down as well. Aizawa looked at the blonde for a moment, a question in his eyes that remained unspoken, and then she felt the scarf fall away and her quirk return.

Katsuki looked at her, and she nodded, letting Katsuki know she was fine for him to leave, though he spared one more angry look at their teacher before he turned to walk back toward the dorms. Surprisingly, Shoto was the one who lingered.

“Aizawa-sensei,” he said. “I’m not comfortable leaving without fully advocating for Uraraka’s innocence. The American...”

“Go.” There was no room for argument. “I’ll see to the American student later.”

Shoto nodded stiffly before following after Katsuki. She waited until everyone was gone, standing in the middle of an empty lawn- not trusting herself to talk or speak without screaming at him.

It was all there- unspoken on her tongue, sitting there like battery acid.

“Well?” he said finally, looking at her expectantly.

“Well, what?”

“Care to explain?”

She sneered and walked toward him, past him. She needed to get away before she said things she couldn’t take back, all the things that she wanted to say and was too afraid.

“No,” she snapped.

He reached out for her. “Uraraka you...”

“Don’t touch me,” she screamed, shoving his hand off of her. “Don’t fucking touch me.”

He retracted his hand, holding his palms out in front of him. But that wasn’t enough. She wanted something from him, and she had no idea what it was- no idea how to get it. So, she swung at him. He dodged it easily.

She threw a hard kick, but he batted it away, almost casually.

She lunged, and he jumped back out of reach.

“You can’t just take my quirk whenever you fucking want,” she yelled. Her kicks and punches were sloppy and angry and tired, and she could barely see him through the film of tears in her eyes.

But this time, he didn’t restrain her in her advances. He let her throw her punches, catching them occasionally and batting them away, but mostly evading.

But in truth, her heart wasn’t in this. She knew that, and so did he. She was swinging her fist at him like a scared and angry child, who was too tired to do anything else besides fight, besides punch and scream and kick.

Because she knew if she stopped fighting, stopped raging, something else would take the place of all the bottled hatred (except it wasn’t hatred, not really, and she knew that too) she felt for her respected teacher.

A teacher.

A mentor.

A caregiver.

A father figure.

A hero.

She tried one more wild kick but lost her balance and went crashing to the ground, legs sprawled like a broke down doll. She pitched forward and dug her hands into the dirt and the grass as a violent sob

ripped through her- tearing something open and flooding her gut with more hurt than she knew what to do with.

So much hurt.

She slammed her fist into the ground hard. She felt sick. Her chest was aching so hard that she couldn't breathe.

"You..." she gripped the grass hard and ripped it up. "You..." she heaved, the words that had been burning in her like a poison pitching their way up her throat, clawing their way toward the light of day. "You were supposed..." She looked up at him. He was obscured in sweat and tears and her wild bangs.

"YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO PROTECT ME!"

The scream echoed around them, relentless and solid, no longer floating around inside of her, infecting her like a poison. The ones she couldn't hold back anymore, and then gasped on them, on the need and the cruelty she found in them. It was too much.

But he didn't look surprised. He was standing in front of her, still, his eyes softer than she had ever seen them.

"I was a kid," she gasped out breathlessly between sobs. "I AM a kid and..." It all hurt so much. "You..." the words continued their onslaught, like vomit purging her of their weight, so heavy and damning inside of her. "I was a kid, and I trusted you!" Her voice strained, painfully under the pointed accusation. "I trusted you! You were my...one of my heroes, and I trusted you!"

She slumped back off of all fours until she was sitting on the ground. She dropped her head against her knees, holding them tight to her. She couldn't bring herself to look at him.

She didn't want to hurt him; she really didn't. If she had, she wouldn't have been so scared of all of this. Maybe she was a monster? At the end of the day, she loved her teacher. She appreciated and respected him so much.

That was why it hurt so bad.

"I thought..." she hugged her legs tighter. "I thought you were gonna come for me." She spoke it like a strained confession. "I thought you were gonna come and..." she choked on a sob and shook her head. "And you never did. You never came for me." Her body shook and

shuddered with the pleading in her voice. "I was in a cage and you left me there, and I just knew you would come because you always do." Her voice pitched up as she let out a soft, sad laugh. "You always save us when we need you to. And you didn't...you didn't..." She could barely breathe, let alone speak, but she couldn't stop now. "...you didn't come for *me*, and now..." She clutched at her chest as if it would do anything to abate the pain she found there.

The anger.

The resentment.

All gathering and twisting at the base of her throat. She wanted it out, but it caught there, digging in its heels.

"And now I'm this angry, bitter, sad person, and I don't...God..." she felt like she was dying, like something in her chest was breaking into a million pieces, piercing her in a million different places. "Now, I'll never be me again. I feel...I feel... like I will never be okay again. Ever." God, she was so afraid of that. So terrified. "And you never came for me. You left me there in that cage and you never came. I promised you would and you didn't."

She had no more words.

Nothing to say.

No more truth to speak to him.

She sobbed wildly into her hands, pouring out so much grief, facing a truth that she had been ignoring for so long.

That she would never be that girl again.

She had hoped for so long to reach the old Ochako again. That had been her goal, what she was reaching for, what she was working for, but some part of her had known, had always known, that whatever she was becoming, it would never be what she used to be.

Ever.

She would never be that girl again, and, even if she became something just as good or better, that version of herself was gone.

Ripped away from her without her say-so.

Left in a cage, sad and broken.

And she felt so much grief; grief she had been staying with anger. And she needed someone- anyone- to blame.

And Aizawa was as good as any.

She couldn't bring herself to look up, to see if he was still there. She would understand if he had left about halfway through her spewed accusations. But then she heard the movement, shuffling, and the sound of weary bones bending.

And then, almost shocking her, the feather-light touch of a hand on her shoulder. It lay there for a moment, just his fingertips, and when she didn't pull away, he gripped her lightly. Slowly, she raised her head, peering up at him with her swollen eyes. He was crouched down in front of her, balancing on his heels.

"I know..." she sobbed. "I know...I know you tried. I know you tried so hard. And I meant what I said at the hospital. I meant it." She shook her head and squeezed her eyes tight. "I survived because of what you taught me. I know it wasn't your fault. I know that in my head. But...I'm still..." She struggled to catch her breath again, to finish, but her throat was achy and raw.

"You're angry with me..." he finished for her. He was calm, not offended, or surprised. There was perhaps more emotion in his voice than she was used to hearing, more understanding, but he still sounded like her teacher.

She nodded weakly, resigned, and pathetic. "So angry," she affirmed.

He exhaled slowly, his grip on her shoulder tightening slightly. A small shudder racked her body like an aftershock as she raised her arm to wipe weakly at her face with her sleeve. Her face was far more busted up from this than it had been by her fight.

"You're allowed to be angry, Uraraka," he said, voice barely above a whisper. "You're allowed to be angry with me. A lot...a lot of people let you down." She swallowed hard and looked up at him again. "And I am so so sorry for all that happened to you, and I..." he cleared his throat, evening out the slightest of tremors in his voice. "I am so very sorry that I failed you." He offered nothing else.

No addendums.

No pleas.

No explanation.

No promises.

Just that...

A simple apology.

An acknowledgment.

It's so small. And it's everything at the same time.

And she wondered, looking now at her teacher, if that could have truly been all she needed from him? Just those words, sincerely offered.

Was it...could...could it *sometimes* be as simple as that?

So few things were simple right now for her, but...maybe this was; maybe this particular burden, this anger was simple.

Maybe all she needed was to hear him- someone- some adult in her life, say that they were sorry. She didn't need them to feel guilt or burden, but just recognize what she was in this world.

A teenage girl

A student.

A kid in so many ways.

He moved to stand, presumably to leave her with that apology, but her hand shot out suddenly, grabbing his sleeve. His brow furrowed in confusion as he turned to look at her. She bent her head again- weighed down by a different rush of emotion as he settled back down in front of her, allowing her to keep her hold on his sleeve.

It was like something being let loose inside of her, something falling back into its rightful place, the relief of coughing up a fishbone that had been caught too long in her esophagus. She wondered if she would ever stop crying- she felt like it was all she did anymore.

And now she could add her teacher to the list of people who have seen her sob like a baby.

She cried until she couldn't anymore. She cried and clung to the loose black fabric of his sleeve. She cried until her head hurt. She cried for

that girl. She would miss her.

But maybe she was learning how to love the girl she was becoming. She just needed a little more time. When she was done, she loosened her hold on his sleeve and returned to hugging her legs, resting her forehead on her knees, waiting to settle back into her skin.

Aizawa remained sitting in front of her, one leg bent at the knee, the other splayed lazily to the side- almost casual, and Ochako wondered for a moment if he had lazed around like this when he was a student- like she did with her friends.

She released the next, less weighted confession as if it had been shaken loose by her released rage. "I don't know if I deserve to be a hero anymore."

She hadn't really said that out loud yet either. She had thought it plenty, but she hadn't said it to her friend- she knew what they would say. They would flock to assure her, to try and comfort those feelings away.

But they didn't know.

So, she offered it to someone who did know.

"I'm afraid I can't really be a hero after all that I did..." she sighed, trembling. "A real hero would have figured out...would have died before they killed someone, and I just...I..." She didn't know how to speak to it- she knew it wasn't simple. She knew it wasn't easy as killing or not killing- but still, the end result was the same.

People were dead at her hand.

And she had no idea how to touch that.

"I don't know if it's my place to tell you that the hero path is for you or anyone else." He never lied. He was like Katsuki in that way. "But..." He leaned back on the hand pressed into the dirt behind him, looking like a bag of loose bones. "I've spoken to every single person arrested in that place, and most of the victims. So..." he let out a long breath and raked his hands through his messy hair before draping it back across his knee. "I have a pretty good idea of what happened."

She squeezed her knees harder and felt her heart rate spike. She knew this- of course- but they hadn't spoken on it yet. It remained this heavy weight between the two of them, both knowing and neither

talking.

“I have a pretty fucking good idea about what happened to you. What you had to do...what those...” his fist tightened momentarily in an uncharacteristic display of emotion. “...assholes did to make sure they got the blood that they came for.” She drew in a sharp inhale of air, wincing into her arms as she pushed back against the intrusive memories. She heard him breathe and then intentionally regulate his tone. “And...” he continued, more calmly. “I...I learned why you were so memorable to all of them.”

She let out a small whimper.

“Sexy little sister.”

The fucking embarrassment.

The shame.

The outfit.

“Do you know why they remembered you, Uraraka?”

She snorted bitterly. “Yeah, that fucking skirt.”

“No,” he interrupted, shaking his head. “That wasn’t it. You...you were in an impossible situation- a terrifying situation, one where you could have chosen to keep your hands clean. You would probably sleep better at night if you did; if you had just left people to die in that horribly, humiliating way.”

She remembered what happened the few times she had chosen not to end a fight in death.

How could she not?

Her handler had made her watch.

“*Still think you’re being merciful?*” He had asked her, forcing her head forward.

“It would have been the easier choice,” continued Aizawa. She wasn’t sure if that was true. “Do you know why so many heroes burnout, Uraraka?”

She combed her memory as if he were quizzing her for a test.



Isolation.

Ego.

Too many losses.

“We are supposed to save everyone,” he continued. “And we can’t. So many of us never learn to sit in our own limitations. So, we run and hide, or drink, or look away from all the people we can’t save. We hustle for the 100 more saves to make up for the one we couldn’t, and it drives us crazy because we don’t know how to sit with our losses.” Ochako slowly looked up at her teacher- the man she well and truly trusted despite her rage.

“Heroes don’t usually hold the hands of people we can’t save,” he continued. “We go, and we fight and deny until we drop.” Ochako winced slightly. Heroes don’t do that, but she did. She wasn’t cut out to be a hero; was that his way of telling her that? “And frankly...” he continued, cutting through her spiral. “I think it makes us less heroic.”

She hadn’t seen that coming.

She looked up at him, questioning and tentative, maybe hopeful for the first time in a long time. He was looking at her intent and serious. “What you chose to do,” he continued. “To hold the hands, hold the bodies, and look into the eyes of the people that you couldn’t save, just to give them some dignity and comfort in their last moments. You chose something that would give them maybe five seconds of peace, knowing full well you would never be the same, and I...” he swallowed hard but held her gaze, and she felt her eyes welling up yet again- a whole new unnamable emotion bubbling up inside of her. “... I’ve never been more proud of a student.” She let out an involuntary sound, something between a whimper and a sob. “So,” he continued. “While I can’t convince you that you should be a hero, I do think the world needs more heroes like you.”

She sniffled and wiped her face with her sleeve. “Thank you, sensei,” she whispered shakily, bowing her head slightly before she looked up at him again with a small smile. “And even though I’ve been an angry ball of rage lately, you...you are still my favorite teacher.”

Aizawa snorted, but he didn’t seem displeased at the comment. “Don’t tell Mic,” he said. “He’ll be devastated.”

She laughed, feeling the tension begin to ease from her jaw and chest.

“So,” she said, shifting to her knees as Aizawa moved to stand up.  
“What’s my punishment?”

He looked down at her in mock bewilderment. “For what? For fighting a teacher or a visiting student when you’re supposed to be an ambassador for UA?”

“Both?” she asked tentatively as she stood up, wiping the dirt from her pants. He shoved his hands into his pockets and looked up at the canopy of trees above their heads.

“Did he deserve it?”

She shrugged casually. “He used his quirk on me and tried to kiss me without asking.” Aizawa’s eyes flashed, dangerous, and cutting. “Then he called Shoto a homophobic slur soooo...yes?”

He breathed in his nose and out his mouth. “You won the fight, right?”

“Tch...” he raised an eyebrow, and his eyes narrowed at her scoff, but he didn’t comment. “Please, sensei,” she said. “I kicked his ass.”

He motioned for her to follow him back toward the cafeteria, surprising her with an affectionate ruffle of her hair.

“You’ve been spending too much time with Bakugo.”

But he didn’t sound upset about it.

Not really.

###

Katsuki had been flaming mad.

Earjack had reluctantly shared a little bit more about the nature of Uraraka’s beef with that scumbag, and he had hounded Icy-Hot for more about what had led to the fight.

Both revelations had him seeing red.

And he was fucking pissed as hell that the pervert was already with Recovery Girl, or Katsuki would be hunting him down to do something decidedly unheroic.

But another part, a nagging part, was also upset at her. He wasn’t

proud of it. Hell, she wasn't obligated to tell him anything, and it wasn't like he told her every detail of his day.

Yet...

He was angry (maybe hurt, though he would never admit it) that she hadn't come to him when some predatory asshole had been making her feel unsafe. He understood with Mineta- they hadn't been close then. But things were different right now.

Surely she had to know that he would do anything for her.

And now, his nerves were a bit raw and heightened- so much so that when he heard a knock at his door, he didn't even hide how fast he crossed the room to open it.

Ochako stood there looking, well, a bit hellish, honestly. Her eyes were swollen and red, and her face was streaked with dirt and sweat. But she wasn't crying anymore. She did moan, somewhat dramatically as she shuffled past him toward his bed and fell face-first into his comforter, her lower half hanging off the end of the bed.

He breathed in, collecting his emotions as he turned to follow her. He stood at the foot of his bed, and she let out another pained groan.

"I know that little prick didn't give you a challenge, so what are you bitching about?" She rolled onto her back and covered her eyes with her arm.

"Head hurts," she moaned.

He sighed and rolled his eyes before going to his desk to grab his water bottle. "Sit up," he ordered. She did so grudgingly and took the water he held out to her before he climbed into the bed, so he was sitting behind her.

"Scoot," he said.

She obeyed without question, trusting and obliging in a way that always made his chest ache just a little bit under the weight and privilege of that. He scooted up behind her, one leg hanging off the bed and the other bent at the knee, creating a barrier between the two of them, so she wasn't sitting directly in between his legs.

"Mind if I touch your shoulders?"

She looked over her shoulder, her brow knitted in confusion, but she didn't look mad or afraid. "Why?"

He scowled at her. "Well, if you want your head to keep hurting, then be my guest..." She hurriedly turned around and scooted back closer into him. He reached out, tentatively, and then paused to wipe his hands on his pants- just in case. Then he used one hand to nudge at her neck. She responded by letting her right ear fall to her shoulder, exposing the slope of her neck to her shoulder. Slowly, lightly, he pressed his fingers into the corded muscles there, his thumb pressing firmly to the base of her skull.

She sighed contentedly, her head lulling easily into his hand as his fingers dipped and pressed and circled the knots and tensed bunches in her neck and shoulders. For the first time, he noticed that she was beginning to gain weight; while she was still far from her original roundness, it was nice to see the physical manifestations of her growing health.

But he could also feel the week of tension there, the twisted way her body furrowed in on itself, and he wondered- suddenly- that after all of that shit she had been through- physically, emotionally, and mentally, with all that trauma and stress stored in her body- if she had gotten a massage yet?

But he supposed she was still working through some of her touch aversion, and that might be just a little too much. Although, she seemed perfectly content to let him work his hands into the pockets of stress at her neck. He guided her head forward with his hands so he had better access to the back of her neck. Both of his thumbs moved up either side of her neck and then down the space between her shoulder blades.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked, suddenly, his voice tight. He hadn't meant to ask and felt a stab of guilt when he felt her tense beneath his fingers. He moved back up her neck, coaxing her back into a state of ease. She sighed heavily.

"What would you have done?" she asked. He considered the question for a moment.

"He tried to kiss you," he said without inflection. She didn't answer, but she didn't have to. "And he used his quirk on you." He had to pull his hands away quickly, his palms instinctively reacting to his anger. He wiped them on his pants again.

“Exactly,” she said, but her voice sounded almost amused; she looked over her shoulder and winced at the movement. He rolled his eyes and motioned for her to turn forward again. He held one shoulder in place with a firm grip and then pushed against the other, helping her to work out the tension in her spine.

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?”

She snorted. “You would have hurt him,” she said. He didn’t bother to deny it. “You would have hurt him bad, and he isn’t Kiri or Deku or Shoto. You might actually have done permanent damage with him.”

“And,” he growled, pushing a little harder, but easing up when she winced, replacing the pressure with something much more gentle. “He would have deserved it, the little fucker.”

“He’s irrelevant,” she said. “I don’t care about him; I care about you, Katsuki. And I don’t want you to be expelled.” She said it teasingly, but he didn’t miss the slight inflection in her voice- the slight plea, and it did something to ease his own tension.

He had been worried that maybe she didn’t trust him, wondered why she had kept it a secret. And even if he felt like the worry was misplaced, he knew why now.

“So are you getting expelled?” he asked.

She laughed. “No,” she said. “Aizawa and I...we talked our shit out.” That was good. “And he said he would take care of Brendan.”

“Good,” he growled. “Because if that little shit showed back up here, I *would* get expelled.” She smiled but didn’t say anything, and for some reason, he felt the need to fill the silence with his own thoughts. “I...I want you to talk to me,” he grumbled reluctantly. “I know you can take care of yourself, but I’m also here if...if you’re in trouble or whatever.”

“I...” she bit her lip and stopped her sentence, as if she was thinking about what to say next and whether or not she wanted to say it out loud. “It wasn’t just that I was worried about you murdering him.” She slumped forward slightly as if she was suddenly remembered how tired she was.

“I was embarrassed.”

He stiffened, the movement of his hands stilling. He caught the angry

snarl on its way up before it fully formed in his features. He wanted to tell her that she was being stupid.

That she had nothing to be embarrassed of.

And now he was pissed off even more at that son of a bitch for making her feel that way.

But he gritted his teeth and swallowed. Her feelings were hers, and they were more important than his right now.

*“People in trauma states often experience the past as present, unable to integrate them into their current narrative. Their emotions often come from this place and are a sincere and authentic response. Respecting their emotions is essential as they learn to integrate their past experiences into their current reality.”*

He remembered being a little confused by that at the time that he read it, but it was beginning to make more sense to him.

“Why?” he asked, fanning out his fingers over her scalp. She sighed again and let her head fall back into the palm of his hands.

His deadly, explosive hands.

“Because,” she said. “I felt stupid. You told me he was sleazy.”

He breathed in his nose and out his mouth. “No,” he said. “I told you he was flirting with you- I didn’t tell you he was a predator. If I had known that, I would have fucked him up already.”

“Yeah, but you...”

“I said he wasn’t good enough for you, Uraraka,” he grumbled under his breath. “But I’m gonna think that about every loser who comes sniffing around, but you...you don’t have to be worried about an, “I told you so” from me- not about shit like that. When it comes to that, I’ll always be on your side, yeah?”

She nodded, a slow, languid movement, her body significantly more relaxed.

“I guess I just...I already feel like everyone already knows all my business and...” she shrugged. “And all of that...” she gestured vaguely. “Is already so terrifying for me, and I have no idea how to navigate it or talk about it.”

All of that?

Attraction? Romance? Relationships?

Is that what she meant?

“Yeah,” he said. He let his hands fall from her scalp. “Yeah, makes sense.”

“I know,” she said, looking over her shoulder, eyes wide with sincerity. “I know you’re here. You’re always here in the best way. I just... I don’t want to need you so much that I can’t stand on my own.”

He understood.

He understood, but he wanted to say something.

He wanted to say that he needed her too.

That it wasn’t even just about need, but rather he *wanted* to be on her team. For as long as he could. But he didn’t say that. She turned, so she was facing him fully, so she could look him in the eyes.

“...But I know you’re here,” she repeated with a firm nod. “I do.”

He had a lot of things he wanted to say, but he wouldn’t, not yet anyway. So instead, he took her hand and raised her bruising knuckles to his eyes. “What’s your punishment for this?” he asked, holding her hand up to her own face.

“I told you,” she said. “We just talked it out- no punishment.”

He glared at her and released her hand. “Fucking double standard!”

She threw her head back and laughed. “Hey, I’m a first-time offender,” she said. “And I wasn’t working out latent feelings of inferiority on a high school rival.”

He rolled his eyes. “Unjust is what it is!”

She wrinkled her nose in a smile that made him just a little weak. “Maybe if you didn’t scowl so much,” she said, raising her thumb to press it into the space between his eyebrows. He batted her away.

“Oi, don’t mess with it,” he said. “I’ve been perfecting it for years!”

She moved toward him again, her thumb wielded like a weapon, but he caught her wrist before she made it. The movement- the touch itself- wasn't new. It was not an unfamiliar way to grab her, but, all the same, he felt her pulse jump under his fingers. He moved to let go, but she quickly snatched him back. He could feel her pronounced scars on her fingers against his skin.

His eyes were locked on the wrap of her fingers on his forearm, barely able to reach halfway around it, making it even more impressive that she laid him out regularly these days.

“Katsuki...”

He looked up at her, drawing his gaze from her hand, from the blazing hot spot on his arm where her palm was pressed against him. It wasn't spoken like a question. It was a full statement on his own. She was looking at him, curiously, but not afraid.

She opened her mouth to say something but closed it immediately, thinking better of whatever it was.

“Spit it out,” he barked, keeping his eyes locked on hers, for some reason having to keep them from darting down to her lips.

“Do you...” she looked insecure like she wasn't sure of the question, wasn't sure what she was about to ask of him, and he felt his heart rate spike, and he wondered if she could feel it with her fingers. “Do you think I'll be a good hero?”

He did an internal double-take.

He had no idea where that question had come from or what he was expecting. But he had to fight back the urge to flick her forehead in response, but something about the last few hours (maybe days even) had brought that question forward. He didn't have context, but...he didn't really need it either. That was an easy question as far as he was concerned.

There were a lot of hard questions in his life- a lot of hard questions about how he specifically felt about the girl in front of him.

But this wasn't one of them.

“Fuck yeah, I do,” he said, with a firm nod, leaving no room for argument. He assumed she knew what he thought that, but, he supposed, there was nothing wrong with him saying it.



Her internal script about herself still needed work, and while she didn't need it to be invalidated, she did need to be reminded of the reality that she couldn't quite grasp.

She squeezed his wrist before loosening her grip.

"Thank you, Katsuki," she said. "Means a lot coming from the future number one." When she said it- even with the teasing wink- he could tell she meant it. He has been seeing more of those lately- that toothy hope and impossible faith that she has in the people she respects.

She believed it.

So, he did too.

And it's ridiculous to him that she doesn't think that he needs her too.

# Making Friends with Shadows

## Chapter Summary

Ochako learns a little bit about integration from a classmate who gets it, and she also starts to cope with strange new feelings burgeoning for her best friend.

I really really enjoyed writing this one, friends! :) Thank you all for your support and encouragement

\*CW

Nothing really new- continued flashback, and Ochako does struggle with some guilt over her feelings for Katsuki, assuming it means something is wrong with her because often that "reawakening" of any sexual feelings after assaults can feel wrong for a victim, and Ochako copes with that- but once again her negative characterization is because of her own complicated feelings and this chapter is a lot of working through that toward the reality :)

I really really enjoyed writing this one! It really meant a lot to me and I hope you like it!

She hugged- literally and unapologetically- hugged Aizawa when he told her she could return to a normal class schedule. She hadn't planned on that, but when he told her that she had a solid enough handle on her quirk that she wasn't a threat to herself or others, it had just jumped out of her.

And she didn't even care that he added quickly that if things became too stressful or if her quirk evolved again in any unexpected way that they made need to resume their lessons again. She just smiled dutifully up at him and saluted him comically.

When she joined them for class, All-Might welcomed her back jovially, and, surprisingly, she didn't mind at all. It didn't feel like a fuss, but rather like he was genuinely glad to have her back. And at the beginning of her first drill with her class since returning, she was bouncing and dancing excitedly around Tsu and Iida, almost feeling normal again.

And everything went great. She was able to show off the way her

quirk had developed, along with her combat skills, sharper and faster due to her regular training with Katsuki, Shoto, and Deku. She felt strong and normal and whole in a way she hadn't in a long time.

And now, along with her team of Koda, Momo, and Shoji, she was excited to kick some ass in her first team drill since rejoining her class. They were up against the formidable combination of Iida, Kaminari, and Tokoyami.

Due to her increased ability to maneuver in the air with ease, she was guarding the villain headquarters, serving as the eye-in-the-sky.

Which meant her primary opponent would likely be Dark Shadow.

Or Tokoyami, should the hero choose to leave the ground.

She had a slight advantage, given that they were in the light of day. But also, he was near impossible to get the upper hand on. And she only had to be looking the wrong direction for a moment for him to surprise her.

Which- he almost did, but she was getting faster. She deactivated her quirk quick enough to drop several feet down and out of the line of the swat from the shadowy bird (she could all but see the remorse in his eyes, like he would apologize to her if he could- the light from the sun taking the edge that she knew existed in the creature, and Ochako had always taken the time to give the good boy a few pats any chance she could- an act that Tokoyami took in stride).

But now was not the time for that.

Right now, she was a villain- a ruthless villain, and if Dark Shadow was close by, then that meant that Tokoyami was likely making a break for her their flag. She activated her quirk again and launched herself full speed after Dark Shadow, staying low enough in the industrial area of their training.

She pushed once again off the ground, manipulating her gravity incrementally so she wouldn't float off into the air, but was light enough to jump and land with ease. When the shadow fell over her, blocking out the light of the sun, she didn't even bother looking up to see who it was. She dropped and rolled out of the way as Dark Shadow's claw slammed into the concrete, leaving a crater where she had once been.

Perfect.

She continued to duck and roll and weave, moving in and out of zero-gravity, touching the chunks of debris left behind by her destructive foe. She jumped into the air, using the floating pieces of concrete as both shields and steppingstones, looking down as she jumped from one to the other, narrowly avoiding Dark Shadow until she saw Tokoyami, sprinting below her.

She kicked off one of the pieces of concrete and increased her own gravitational pull, launching herself at Tokoyami like a comet. He let out a pained grunt as she collided with him, releasing her quirk as they rolled. He landed on top of her, but she was no slouch in coming out of zero-gravity, and her fingers were already on his shoulder. So when she kicked him off of her with all the force she could muster, it sent him flying into the air.

But Dark Shadow quickly retaliated- curling around a building and sling-shotting Tokoyami, redirecting him back toward their headquarters. Tokoyami was in zero-g, but Dark Shadow was not, and she supposed it didn't matter which of them grabbed the flag.

Ochako kicked off the ground after him, catching him by the leg.

A sharp kick to the temple momentarily made her blackout, but her firm hold on his foot didn't loosen. She climbed up Tokoyami's still Zero-G body, latching herself onto him like a stubborn backpack before releasing her quirk on both of them.

This time the landing was not so smooth, and she felt (heard) her ankle snap under her, but the pain was masked by the adrenaline as she scrambled to her feet. But she found she couldn't run after Tokoyami, who had taken full advantage of his returned gravity and was once again sprinting after their flag. Her ankle wouldn't let her pursue. So instead, Ochako fell on all fours and pressed her palms into the asphalt; the makeshift street trembled and tremored beneath her. The pebbles and debris and rocks in her sphere rose around her as the ground cracked, and then finally released entirely, like a rug being taken out from under Tokoyami.

She took advantage of this and kicked off of her good leg and threw herself at him for the third time. This time with far less grace and care, but it didn't matter. She just needed to keep him from the flag.

They wrestled briefly before she got the upper hand, her elbow pressed hard to his neck, her knee in his chest, and his arm twisted into the ground.

She had him.

She had subdued him.

And she knew how fucking tough Tokoyami was. How strong he was- strong enough to rival Bakugo and Shoto and Deku. He didn't get nearly enough credit as far as Ochako was concerned, and she had the upper hand right now.

And that thought made her feel strong and powerful. Good.

And then, intrusive and painful, she heard Dark Shadows whimpers from somewhere nearby, the sensitive shadow crying a few feet away. It shook her out of her momentary surge of victory and replaced it with something else entirely.

And suddenly she was afraid.

The whimpers.

The cries.

The wincing.

Her fourth kill had cried in her arms.

Whimpered.

Clung to her hand, desperately.

He hadn't wanted to die.

Tokoyami must have sensed this brief distraction, seen her hesitancy, and he did not hesitate to exploit that weakness. He freed his arm, and easily reversed their positions. Dark Shadow was on her in a moment, pinning her to the ground as Tokoyami continued to run. Dark Shadow didn't let up until Tokoyami was well out of range- hell, he may already have the flag.

When she was released- she sat up, exhausted, sweaty, and covered in soot and debris. She didn't run after him.

Her ankle was throbbing anyway.

###

Ochako let out a wince of pain as Recovery Girl touched her ankle.

“It’s broken,” she said, confirming what Ochako already knew from the god-awful swelling and purpling of her ankle. Her shoe had been a bitch to get off, so she wasn’t surprised to hear that news. Recovery Girl tsked and shook her head.

“Lucky, you aren’t one of my usuals,” she said. “But...” she looked at Ochako carefully. “If you’re going to be using your quirk to turn yourself into a human bullet, then I’m going to need you to start eating enough to sustain that. It was a hard fall, no doubt, but you need to nourish your bones and muscles, so they keep up with you.”

Ochako wilted slightly under the scolding but looked up when Recovery Girl pressed a hand into hers. “But,” she added. “I can see that you’re doing much better. So just...keep it up. Now...” Recovery Girl pointed to her own cheek. “Do you mind?”

Ochako smiled at the woman and shook her head, tilting her own cheek downward for her to kiss. “Go ahead.”

It shouldn’t drain too much of her energy- Ochako didn’t think, but when Recovery Girl pulled away, she did feel a bit dizzy, needing to fall back briefly onto the pillow. She didn’t have much time, though. She was already five minutes late for English.

She breathed out slowly, trying to ignore the now dull ache in her ankle and work up the energy when she saw movement from the corner of her eye.

“Recovery Girl said to drink this...”

She turned to see Tokoyami standing beside her bed- a glass of orange juice in his hands.

“Thanks,” she said, reaching out with one hand to take the glass and the other to pat Dark Shadow on the head as he fussed around her ankle. “What are you doing here?” she asked with a smile- letting him know she didn’t mind, but that she was surprised.

“I want to escort you either back to class or to the dorm.”

She smiled gratefully and sipped her orange juice. “I’m good to go back to class.”

“After you drink the juice,” called Recovery Girl from somewhere out of sight. “And eat the crackers.” Ochako looked around, trying to locate the crackers, and then Tokoyami held those up as well.

“Ahh,” she said with a nod, accepting them. “Thank you again!”

He nodded stonily, and Ochako suddenly felt shy under his attentive gaze as she hurried to finish her juice. Maybe he was impatient?

“Sorry,” she said. “You really don’t have to wait.”

“You’ll be on crutches for the rest of the day,” said Recovery Girl. “Too much weight on it will disrupt the healing. So best accept Tokoyami’s help! He’s the most responsible of you lot as it is.”

Ochako sighed and rolled her eyes, and looked at Tokoyami apologetically. “I don’t mind,” he assured her. “You’ll need assistance.”

She downed the rest of her orange juice and shoved the crackers into her mouth. Dark Shadow followed her retreating hand for another pet. She gave it happily before wiping the crumbs from her gym tank top. Her school clothes were back in the locker room, except for her blazer. She supposed she could throw that on over her tank-top, no matter how dumb it looked with her training pants.

It wasn’t like they were particularly strict about dress code around here.

“Keep it wrapped all day,” said Recovery Girl, as Ochako shifted out of bed. “Ice it in the evening and keep it elevated.”

Ochako nodded, accepting the crutches from Tokoyami, who shouldered her bag as well.

“Thank you,” she said, still unsure about why Tokoyami was the one who came to help her. There was surely no way he felt guilty over her injury; he was rational to a fault.

They walked in silence for a moment, him helping her wobble through doors and down steps until they were out in the fresh air and heading toward the main building. She thought for a moment they would walk in silence the entire time before he turned to her, breaking that quiet with a simple question.

“Why did you hesitate?”

She stumbled slightly as her crutches sunk deeper into the grass than she had accounted for her. He reached out and settled her.

“What?”

“In our fight,” he said with a nod. “Why did you hesitate when you had the upper hand?”

She continued to hobble forward, thinking about how to answer that in a way that wouldn't freak him out- that wouldn't make him think she was a psychopath. She understood the question, though- and wanting an answer- she hated when people went easy on her.

“It...it didn't have anything to do with you,” she offered weakly.

“I know,” he said without missing a beat. She wondered what that must be like? To be so certain in abilities and his estimation of himself as a serious contender. “I want to know what it *was* about.”

“I...I don't know,” she answered.

He looked at her skeptically. “I feel like you are lying to me.”

She smirked. “I am,” she answered honestly. She cleared her throat, trying to hold the shame at bay as it rose in her chest. Shame- Dr. Shoko always told her- was one of the very few unhelpful emotions. It didn't mean she should feel guilt over it, but rather to pay attention to when it rose up.

*“Ask yourself,” Dr. Shoko had said. “When you feel shame, what is the story that you are telling yourself? Ask yourself, is it a true story? Is it the reality?”*

She breathed out slowly. “Do you...Did you read anything? About what happened?”

“I gleaned enough,” he answered.

“We fought,” she said with a soft nod. “We fought a lot.”

“Yes.”

“And people died.”

He looked at her from the corner of his eye, but there was no judgment there, just his attention; he didn't look surprised.

“No one...no one really wanted to do it, but we didn't have a choice.”

Breathe.



In.

Out.

*The story she was telling herself: "I'm a murderer."*

*The reality: "People died no matter what. There was nothing you could do. You did everything you could."*

"I didn't know I was even capable of some of the things that I did," she said. "I didn't think I could hurt someone...k-kill someone." She spoke the words, trembling and tentative, but he remained unscandalized beside her. "And I guess, I'm afraid that whatever came out of me when I was pushed that far is..." she stopped walking and looked down at the grass under her feet. Tokoyami stopped a few feet in front of her; she heard him turn to face her. "What if...what if it's still inside of me? What if I still can hurt people like that? What if..." She looked up at him. "What if I can't control it when I need to?"

Tokoyami looked at her for a moment, his intelligent eyes probing into her- like he was staring into her soul. And she wasn't sure she wanted him to find it.

What would he find?

"I may not understand fully, Uraraka," he started. "But, I do know a thing or two about being afraid of my own darkness, of being afraid that something may push me beyond control."

Ochako had heard of those moments, though she had never seen them firsthand. She had heard of those moments when Dark Shadow had raged beyond control; she had heard of the damage that currently docile shadow was capable of, when that being took on a literal life of its own.

"How did you learn to control it?" she finally asked, looking between Tokoyami to Dark Shadow. "The darkness?"

Dark Shadow rested lazily on her shoulder, so free and adorable. She reached up and scratched its head- lulling it into a pleased little purr as its eyes slid shut.

Tokoyami looked at his shadow for a moment and then back to Ochako, looking somewhat like a wise Yoda, who was all but telling her that she already knew the answer as she doted on Dark Shadow.

But she didn't.

She didn't know anything, really.

"I made friends with it," he answered with a shrug. "Simple as that. I learned that my darkness wasn't something to be afraid of or rejected or buried, but something that was apart of me, meant to be integrated into my whole being, rather than rejected and alienated."

Integrated.

How was she supposed to do that when so much felt fractured inside of her?

"When I learned how to appropriately feed my darkness," continued Tokoyami. "It didn't become a ravenous and starving monster. And I learned so much more about it, and I found it had a lot to say to me, a lot to teach me about myself."

She nodded, letting his words sink in. His words were always valuable- sometimes inscrutable- but always weighted with some kind of wisdom.

"How do I do that?" she asked.

"Carefully," he answered. "Over time, with practice and with help. Introduce your darkness over and over again to your light, and, eventually, they will become friends."

Funnily enough, his words made sense, sinking into her mind and soul in a way that she was a little surprised by.

"Make friends with it," she repeated as they continued to walk toward class. She looked over at the boy beside her. "Thank you, Fumikage," she said, squeezing his hand briefly before letting it go. "That helps a lot, actually."

He nodded, a curt motion, but he looked pleased. "I don't want you to get in your own way, Uraraka," he said. "You will be a fantastic hero- so trust yourself."

She smiled and nodded.

"Okay," she said. "Next time. I'll make sure you stay down."

He looked at her with something close to a smirk (she didn't know he could smirk) as he opened the door for her and walked with her down

the empty hallway toward their English class.

“We’ll see,” he said.

When they got to class, he opened the door for her, and she hobbled in on her crutches. Tokoyami followed her to her desk, dropping the bag beside her wordlessly, Present Mic remaining undisturbed in his lesson.

Deku spun in his chair to look at her, his eyes checking her over, and she gave him a big thumbs up and a smile.

He looked relieved as he turned back around- accepting her words as true- something that a few weeks ago, she wasn’t sure if he would do.

Maybe because all those times before, it would have been a lie.

This wasn’t a lie. She was tired, and her ankle was throbbing, but she was good. Not fine.

She was good.

###

“Dumb-ass!”

“Yeah...yeah...” she huffed.

“Stupid!”

“I heard you!”

“Airhead...”

“Katsuki, you made your point,” she growled as she flopped down onto the couch in the common room. She had made it through all of her classes but was beginning to feel the fatigue of the day.

“We’ve worked on that landing a million times!”

She grumbled and pouted as Katsuki made his way into the kitchen. “Jeez, Bakubro, lay off,” said Kirishima, falling onto the couch beside her. “You aren’t her dad!”

“Oh, quiet,” scolded Mina. “It’s sweet!”

Ochako heard a growl from the kitchen, making Ochako smirk. “Don’t

worry,” she said. “I’ll be back on my feet in no time.”

“I’m not worried about your pussy-ass injury,” he barked.

“Pussy-ass?” mouthed Kirishima, looking between them. Both she and Mina shrugged.

“I’m pissed you didn’t stick a landing that I know you can!”

She grinned over the couch at him as he set about reheating some food from the night before. Food she had made- thank you very much- well, with Katsuki’s help as he barked orders at her like a dad teaching his teen how to drive. But still, the stew had turned out pretty good.

Kirishima sniffed the air. “Hey, is that from last night?”

She grinned and nodded. “Yup!”

“Hey,” called Kirishima. “Bakubro, could you...”

“Absolutely not,” he called back. “Get off your ass and make your own.”

Kirishima pouted. “You literally just have to put a little bit more into the pot!”

“Yeah, and so can you!”

“So mean!”

“Come on, Katsuki,” she called. “It’ll save on dishes!”

Katsuki didn’t respond, but she could hear the splash of more stew hitting the pot and him muttering under his breath.

“Want me to serve your damn nerd and the rest of the fucking Dekusquad too?!”

“Nope,” she said. “He and Shoto are on a picnic date!”

“That’s right,” exclaimed Mina, kicking her legs excitedly. “It’s literally the more adorable thing ever!”

Ochako nodded, shifting so that she was leaned up against the arm of the couch and grabbed a cushion. “I know,” said Ochako. “Shoto was all fussy over what to put in the basket.”

Kirishima helped her situate the cushion under her ankle. "How's it feeling, Uraraka?"

"It's fine," she said with a wave of her hand. She strained to bend and unwrap it, but it hurt to point her toe toward her so she could grab the end of the wrap. "It's the healing more than anything else. I'm supposed to ice it a few times before bed. But she told me that I should be good to get back on it tomorrow as long as I don't overwork it today."

She bent her knee and kept her foot from pressing down hard against the cushion. She slowly unwrapped it, moaning with relief as it was released from the pressure.

Kirishima let out a low whistle. "That's a beauty."

It was still swollen and purple, but the bones were healing.

"Move!"

She looked up to see Katsuki standing in front of Kirishima, shooing him off of the couch so he could take his spot. Kirishima, for some reason, looked all too pleased to stand and surrender his spot to Katsuki, who was already holding an ice pack.

He tsked as he took moved the cushion into his lap and guided her foot carefully back down onto it. He glared at the injury as though it were a testament to his own failure.

So dramatic.

She let out a yelp as he brought the ice pack down onto her ankle. "Oh, calm down," he said. "You're fine."

She pouted playfully, kicking him slightly with her good foot, but he caught it with his free hand and pulled it so that it was also in his lap beside her injured ankle, and for some reason, some unbidden inexplicable reason, she felt her face grow warm in a way that was both familiar and felt so completely distant.

So distant, she barely recognized it.

She watched as he held the icepack down to her ankle while his other hand was still lightly on top of her good ankle, his fingers lightly brushing the skin there. She looked up at Kirishima and Mina. Mina was on her phone, and Kirishima was just chatting away with Katsuki

about something. No one found it odd. But she supposed there was no reason that they would. There was nothing particularly intimate about the touch, but she was suddenly very aware of the sensation of his callouses against her skin- exceedingly tender and delicate.

Her throat closed slightly, and she suddenly felt very claustrophobic. But still not wanting to move and alert Katsuki to the fact that she was currently, for some reason, freaking out. It made no sense. It was just his palm on her ankle. The boy regularly had his hands on her.

Just a week and a half ago, he had his hands on her neck and shoulders- and it had been...nice.

Thoughtful.

Caring.

But it hadn't made her feel like this.

Like her skin was on fire, keenly aware of every sensation.

She let out a yelp and all but jumped off the cushion when he shifted to adjust the icepack. "Fuck, Uraraka," he said, though not so angry as he could sound, his eyes clearly searching her for any injury. "Calm down."

"Sorry," she mumbled, turning her head slightly into the couch cushion, hiding her blush.

"Stews ready," said Kirishima, sniffing the air like some kind of bloodhound.

"Then go get it," said Katsuki. "It's the least your lazy ass can do."

Kirishima pouted but stood, jostling Mina from the arm of the chair and into the seat. She looked up briefly from her phone to adjust herself in the seat, and her eyes fell on Ochako.

"Ochako," she said, her head cocked to the side curiously. "Are you okay? You look a little flushed? Do you have a fever?"

Before she could assure Mina that she did not have a fever (though that would be a preferable conclusion for her peers to land on right now), Katsuki was reaching out toward her, pressing the back of his hand against her forehead and then her cheek.

She recoiled slightly- batting at his hand. "M'fine," she said.

What was happening?

Why did she suddenly feel sick?

Light-headed.

Dizzy.

“Ummm...actually...I’m really tired all of a sudden.” She pulled her feet, wincing out of Katsuki’s lap. “I’m gonna...I’m gonna go...” Katsuki looked at her, confusion and irritation apparent on his face.

“What the fuck, Uraraka?”

She was feeling very hot and panicked and weird. And had the sudden urge to shower.

“I think I’m gonna go shower and then just go to bed.”

Mina moved to follow after her. “Ochako, are you sure...”

“Really,” she called over her shoulder as she limped hurriedly to the elevator, the high squeak in her voice no doubt undermining her assurances. “I can just...float myself the whole way there,” she insisted. “No pressure on my ankle!”

Katsuki’s eyebrow quirked up, not buying a bit of the bullshit she was spewing.

“G’night friends,” she called, gripping a chair to propel herself weightlessly to the elevator.

*What the fuck was that ?* She asked herself.

She had no idea.

###

Katsuki looked from the icepack to Raccoon-Eyes and back to the elevator.

“What the fuck was that?”

She shook her head, clearly as confused as Katsuki. “I have no idea.”

###

Thankfully, it did not come up again. He never asked, likely a bit used to her relatively odd behavior.

He was a patient friend.

But something was definitely wrong, and Ochako had no idea what it was. Something was wrong with her, and she wanted desperately to figure it out.

She called on all of her coping, her tools, her techniques from therapy to sort out just what was happening in her mind and body. She tried to pay attention to the feeling, to her body, to her sensations. But all of this was gross sticky shame and burning bile in her gut and throat.

Now, for some reason, when she and Katsuki fell into certain positions when sparring, certain touches, certain stumbles- the press of his hand in her back- they all sparked something in her.

Some excitement.

Or pleasure.

Or anticipation.

When he raised his shirt to wipe at the sweat on his brow, and she caught sight of his toned abs, she would feel something inside of her that wasn't good.

Something inside of her that was wrong.

And whatever emotions she was feeling that she didn't recognize and didn't know how to name were always chased away by nausea and fear. Those... those emotions she recognized.

She was sick.

A pervert.

He had been a really good friend to her- kind and good and respectful and supportive. And she was some gross deviant who...felt *something* now when she saw him. Something that was wrong.

Something wicked.

"And what exactly do you feel?" Dr. Shoko pressed.

"I told you," Ochako snapped. "I feel shame and guilt and sticky gross



feelings for being a shitty friend. I feel it in my stomach and my chest and my throat.”

“No,” said Shoko. “Before you feel all of that- what do you feel? What *causes* those feelings?”

Ochako covered her face to hide the beat red of it all.

“I feel...gross...” she repeated; it was the only word she knew. The only one she could find when she groped around.

“Why?”

“Because I’m a pervert,” she exclaimed, tucking her legs under her in her chair.

“How so?”

Ochako scoffed. “Did you not hear me!? When we spar? When he touches me now? My skin feels all hot, and my throat goes all dry, and I want to lean into his touch, and I want to find ways to touch him, and I hope he touches me a little longer! I’m gross!”

It seemed so obvious to her.

The clearest thing in the world.

She slunk back in her chair.

“It’s...just how I feel,” she muttered.

Dr. Shoko looked at her for a moment before folding her hands and leaning forward on her elbows. “Can I ask you something, Ochako?”

Ochako glared at her. “I feel like this is a trap.”

“Not a trap,” said Shoko. “But it may seem like an odd question, and I want you to stick with me, okay?”

Ochako sighed and gestured for her to continue. She hadn’t led her wrong yet. She could trust her here too.

“Is Katsuki an attractive young man?”

“Of course,” she said with a shrug. That wasn’t weird. That was a no-brainer. “Stupidly so.”

Shoko nodded. "And you're just now noticing?"

"I mean...I don't...no. I mean, I've noticed before. It's hard to miss. But that's not what this is," she said, shaking her head. "I've...I've been attracted to people before, but this is...this is different. Which means..." panic bubbled in her chest.

Breathe.

Breathe.

She needed to breathe.

She was safe.

She was in a safe place.

She wasn't face down in a pillow, in a hotel bed, surrounded by the smell of thick perfume and blood.

She was here.

"...so something must be wrong with me, right," she asked, holding herself tight. "What if...what if all of that..."

What if that part of her was broken?

Sick.

It must be.

Why else would she feel like this?

"Okay..." she felt a finger press to her palm, felt Shoko's hands cupping hers, grounding her again. "Okay, Ochako, breathe with me, okay?"

Ochako listened to Shoko's deep inhale and exhale. Deep and loud.

She matched her breathes, blinking away with the dizziness, pushing past the crushing weight in her chest.

She was safe.

"Ochako," said Shoko. Ochako looked up at the woman who was kneeling in front of her. "What you're feeling is completely normal and okay."

"I'm...I'm a bad person for thinking those things about him..." she whimpered, low and embarrassed.

"Did you ever touch Katsuki without his permission?"

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"Dehumanize or objectify him or see him as something less than human?"

She shook her head. But still...something was wrong.

Something in her was wrong.

"Then you aren't a deviant," said Shoko. "You aren't a predator."

"What am I then?" she asked, panicked and desperate. To her surprise, a small smile was tugging at the corners of Shoko's mouth, and that placed her in a state of greater ease.

"Well," said Shoko, moving back to her chair, scooting it a little closer to Ochako. "I hate to break this to you, Ochako." There was a playful lilt to her voice. "But you're a teenage girl with hormones."

*What?*

*That had not been what she expected to hear.*

"Granted," continued Shoko. "There is more you have to consider in your case that not all teenage girls have to navigate. But, right now, what I think is happening is that you are associating sexuality exclusively with shame, pain, and humiliation. Something used to commodify and hurt you."

Ochako felt herself calming down even more, even as those memories were dredged up. Shoko was giving her words, a framework, and it was helping her feel more anchored.

"So right now," continued Shoko. "You are interpreting a normal teenage experience in the context that you most strongly understand and have experienced it in."

The only context.

*"Please, I haven't even kissed a boy yet."*

She had pleaded with her handler before he shoved her into that hotel

room. She had sobbed those words on her knees to him.

“Ochako,” said Shoko, her voice filled with warmth and empathy. “You’re experiencing a normal sensation in your body, and that’s something you should celebrate. It’s like coming awake, but...”

“It’s the storm,” finished Ochako, a familiar mantra oft-repeated in these walls when progress felt just a little too painful

“I know you’re tired,” said Shoko. “I know it feels like there are a million storms, but you are doing it.”

She was doing it.

“Every day, you’re doing it.”

Everyday.

And she was so fucking tired.

“So what do I do,” she asked. “How do I figure this out?”

“I think that we should come up with a plan that will help you recontextualize your sexuality- instead of running away from it.”

She cringed.

“We’ll start small,” said Shoko. “Take it week by week, and we’ll see what happens. And remember.” She leaned forward again and took Ochako’s hand gently in hers, beckoning Ochako to look at her. “Even if you never experience attraction in the way you used to understand it, that’s okay. If you choose not to engage in any type of sexual intimacy again, that still wouldn’t mean that you were broken.”

Ochako nodded. Trying to lean into the room that created for her to explore and question without pressure or expectation.

It was okay.

Either way.

“We just want it to be your choice,” continued Shoko. “This is about your agency. And we don’t know what that will look like for you. But I promise, you won’t have to figure it out alone, okay?”

She wasn’t alone.

She could do this.

She wasn't alone.

###

"Hey, Ochako..."

Ochako's heart hadn't stopped hammering in her chest all day.

Shame and curiosity.

Fear and intrigue.

All of them battled for dominance in her conscious mind.

*"Do one thing this week that makes you feel sexy."*

The word itself put her teeth on edge.

Made her hairs stand up.

Made her gird herself as though a predator were at the door.

"Ochako..."

How was she supposed to decide what sexy felt like?

What made her feel sexy?

Had she ever felt sexy? Even before this?

All she could hear now was the chanting for "sexy little sister" every time she stepped out in that fucking skirt.

Everything bled together, and the before and after were hard to distinguish. She remembered having a crush- she had liked her body well enough, had been confident in her skin.

But sexy?

"Hey Ochako, are you sure that you're..."

"Dammit, Deku, I'm fine!" He had been buzzing in her ear for the past five minutes, checking in ever since she returned from therapy, and she hadn't noticed how much it was bothering her until her hand slapped the table and her words flew from her mouth, causing Tsu to jump and Deku to freeze for a moment.

She looked between her friends, and Deku looked positively heartbroken, even guilty.

God, she was such a bitch.

“O-ochako,” he said. “I-I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to bother you! You just seemed so distracted, and I wanted to make sure that you were...”

“The fuck you apologizing for?”

It was Ochako’s turn to jump at the intrusive voice behind them. She looked over her shoulder to see Katsuki passing through from the bathroom to the elevator, hair wet and towel hanging around his neck.

“She’s the one ignoring you and then snapping at you all bitchy like.”

“Kacchan,” scolded Deku, waving his hands desperately. “Don’t call her that.”

“Didn’t call her a bitch,” he said. He hadn’t. “Said she was acting bitchy.”

Fair.

“No,” protested Deku, rubbing the back of his neck. “I was bothering her, so...”

“No,” said Ochako, shaking her head and reaching out to grab Deku’s hand. “God, Deku, I’m so so sorry.” She smiled at him, assuring. “I was being a bitch. That was totally uncalled for, and I’m sorry.” Deku looked at her for a moment, tentative and worried. Looking over her face intently. “I had a really confusing day at therapy,” she said with a small laugh. “And I’m really in my head right now. But...” she squeezed his hand, and he hurriedly returned the gesture. “I should just have told you that instead of ignoring you and going all moody. So...I’m sorry, Deku.”

“It’s okay,” said Deku, bright and sincere, leaving no room for doubt that he whole-heartedly forgave her.

She looked at Tsu and Iida. “And I’m sorry to both of you, I’m sure I’m not a pleasure to be around today.”

“Oh, that’s okay, Ochako,” said Tsu with a sweet smile. “Do you...do you need anything?”

Ochako was so used to saying no to that question that it almost came out instinctively. But, actually, she was in her head right now. And she had no idea where to start. She actually, surprisingly, did want to talk. She needed help and advice.

She needed...

"Yes," she said, nodding her head. "Actually. Yes." She looked between Deku and Iida, a blush creeping in. She didn't want them to feel rejected after she had snapped at them. "Maybe just..." she looked at Tsu as she stood up. "Uh...can..."

Tsu looked at her, confused. "What is it, Ochako?"

"For fuck's sake..." once again, Katsuki's voice broke through the conversation as he padded over to them, his bare feet slapping on the floor. "Girl talk, froggy! Jeez, you all are so fucking helpless!"

Tsu jumped up hurriedly. "Oh sure...sure... let's go!"

Ochako offered her goodbyes to Deku and Iida as she gathered her stuff.

"Dumbasses."

Ochako rolled her eyes as she turned to face Katsuki.

"And you have the gall to call me bitchy," she smirked.

He shrugged. "I don't regret hurting people's feelings," he said. "You do."

She smiled at him. That was true.

"Thank you," she said.

"Tch...whatever...go do girl talk or whatever."

She nodded, suddenly anxious.

"Right."

She turned and exhaled slowly, meeting Tsu at the stairs. Over her shoulder, she heard Katsuki growl.

"The fuck are you losers looking at?!"

###

When she texted the rest of the 2-A girls, she wasn't exactly sure why-except that she didn't want to deal with this alone.

Not this part.

She knew if she did- it would continue to stay dark and shameful.

She needed people to hype her up.

To check-in.

To support her.

So here she was with all of the girls gathered in Momo's room, surrounded by tea and snacks because Momo was always a good host.

"So what's up, Ochako?" asked Mina, looking up from her spot on the floor to where Ochako was sitting on the bed, cross-legged.

She breathed out, screwing up all of her courage. "I have kind of a weird favor to ask," she said. "Or maybe not favor but some advice?"

"Of course," said Toru. "Anything!"

Ochako threaded her fingers through her hair and gripped slightly, stressing out. "So my...my therapist suggested that I start..." she was turning so red. She couldn't believe she was 17 and needed advice about this thing. This thing that should be natural to her. She looked up. Jirou was sitting across from her, looking at her intently and without an ounce of impatience.

Momo was sitting elegantly at her desk, legs cross and tea in her hands- eyes filled with active intent.

Mina looked like there was nowhere she wanted to be other than listening to Ochako.

They wanted to help.

She had people.

"Uh...I'm having trouble connecting with myself. My body. My sexuality..." she mumbled the last word out and covered her eyes before she continued. "And my therapist gave me some homework to help me recontextualize my sexuality in a way that doesn't feel so



scary. Basically, she wants me to pick something to do once a week that helps me feel sexy in a way that I'm comfortable with and in charge of."

God, she was so weird.

Such a freak.

She dropped her hands away from her face, slowly.

No one looked freaked out. A few looked like they were waiting for her to continue talking, to expand on what she wanted from them as her friends, but no one was freaking out.

"Uh...I just right now," she continued. "I spiral into a lot of shame when I think about anything in the area. And I'm trying to... reconnect, I guess? But slowly," she added. "So I can gain back a little bit of confidence in that area."

There was a beat of silence before Mina spoke.

"Hell yeah, we'll help you with that! We were made to be your hype team!"

"What do you need from us?" asked Jirou, letting her head fall slightly against Momo's knees.

"I think just coming up with stuff right now," said Ochako. "I freak out when I even think about it, so I just need some help brainstorming."

"Should we make a list," asked Momo, moving to open one of the drawers of her desk, pausing to look at Ochako for instruction.

Funnily enough, that sounded like exactly what Ochako needed.

"Yeah, actually," she said with a small smile. "That...that would help."

"Perfect," said Momo, fishing out a notebook and flipping it open. "So first, is there a goal you would want to reach for sure? Or a cap you'd like to set so we know what to work up to?"

Ochako breathed a sigh of relief- this was already helping.

This is what she was missing. She had been flailing- trying to think of something, anything, and immediately her mind went to all the

scariest and most intense things.

“And I can...scratch any of them off if I want?” asked Ochako.

“Absolutely,” assured Jirou. “This will just be a place for us to start, yeah?”

There was freedom there.

Room to breathe.

She just needed room to breathe.

“Okay,” said Ochako with a nod. “Maybe...one day...maybe, I would want to kiss someone.” She sighed. “Big maybe.”

Momo scribbled (maybe it was more like calligraphy, Momo never scribbled) atop the page.

“Alright,” she said with a nod. “Everything else will fall under that.” Momo looked at Ochako. “Shall we just brainstorm?”

Ochako nodded and held her legs to her chest. “Yeah, that would be great.”

And just like that, ideas started to flow, and Ochako found as her friends shouted out ideas that some part of this was actually fun in a way she never would have expected.

She didn't feel the crushing in her chest.

The fear that had threatened to creep into her body when she asked this question.

Shouted from the mouths of people who loved her, who supported her, who checked with her before anything got put on the list- it was all so different.

“Oooh,” said Toru. “Sleep naked on nice sheets?! I always feel sexy when I do that!”

Momo looked at Ochako. She nodded.

“Maybe write ten things that you like about yourself,” said Tsu. “And maybe decide that at least one of those is something physical?”

“Good one,” said Mina.

“Do you have really good lotion?” asked Momo. “Like deeply hydrating and scented?”

“Uh...no.”

“I do,” said Momo. “I’ll give you some. I find that rubbing myself down with a nice hydrating lotion after a bath does wonders to make me feel connected to my body.”

“That...sounds so nice.”

It did.

And so the night went on.

Buy sexy underwear- just for her and no one else.

Take a sexy pic- just for her- she waffled on that but did ultimately add to the list, reminding herself that she could scratch it off if she wanted. Looking at her body was still something so hard for her.

Watch a romantic or sexy movie from the feminine gaze.

Plan another girl's night where they all dressed up however THEY wanted.

Dance (by herself or with the girls).

Wear lip gloss (she liked lip gloss).

Maybe wear a skirt or dress- surprisingly for her, that was as high up on the list as kissing someone in terms of being able to imagine herself doing that. But...maybe one day?

Wear something that made her feel confident and pretty (nice jeans, a cute top, a tunic, and leggings...it didn't have to be a skirt).

Style her hair a new way (she may try that one this week).

Relax in bed while listening to some sexy songs (Jirou volunteered to make a playlist).

A “spa” day with face masks, toenail polish, and a scented candle.

Wear heels.

Relax.

Lay in bed and practice deep breathing.

Flirt with Mina (all the girls volunteered, but Mina got first dibs because it was her idea- and something about that sounded...so fun).

Spend some time naked in her room.

Do some appreciative touching in the shower (not sexual, just touching, getting used to the feel of her skin and muscles and her bones and her body under her own hand, sweet loving touches that made her body feel loved...something she was still learning).

Read a female-centered romance novel (Tsu had some recommendations).

And- finally...

Masturbate.

“I’ve never done it before,” she confessed.

“That’s okay,” said Mina. “If you decide, that’s something you want to do. I’m sure there are a few of us you can talk to.” Jirou raised her hand, and so did Tsu. But it seemed Toru and Momo both were in the same boat as Ochako, which made her feel okay. “Or I can send you some links! Whatever you need, Ochako.”

And there no shame. No awkwardness. No judgment.

Just love and support and promises she could do none, or all, on the list- as long as she was happy and comfortable.

She did cry by the end of the night, and they all fell asleep in Momo’s room, piled on her huge bed.

It was one of the best nights of sleep she had ever gotten.

###

She was starting to recognize her face again. She looked in the mirror, at her slightly glistening lips and her eyes, highlighted with the barest amount of mascara.

Those eyes looked like hers. The longer she looked- the longer she refused to look away- the more they looked like hers.

Her cheeks were still absent, not rounded and fleshy, but a little more

pink, maybe?

Her hair cut had grown into a bob, just below her ears. Mina had lent her some of her product that morning as she picked the easiest option on the list for this week. It was a sculpting gel and a salt spray. Mina had shown her the night before how to style her hair in cute, tousled waves, and she was actually happy with the results.

She looked at the soft, chestnut waves and smiled, just a little bit.

She looked, maybe, pretty?

Would everyone think it was weird?

That she was trying too hard?

She banished the thought and grabbed her books before she chickened out. This was about her—no one else.

She had looked at her reflection and smiled, and that had to mean something today.

###

“Woaaaa, look at you, Uraraka!”

Katsuki looked up at Pikachu’s voice, almost too fast, fast enough that he had to look around to make sure no one had seen just how lame he was. He had barely seen her all weekend, to be fair. She had spent a lot of time with the girls the past few days.

Sleepovers.

Shopping.

All kinds of shit that he was glad she was doing, but still- he had missed her.

And he was past caring about that. It was no one’s business but his.

And maybe hers.

“The hair is tres magnifique,” declared Aoyama.

“Hella cute,” said Shitty Hair, looking at her with that easy, toothy grin. Katsuki wondered what that was like- to have such an easy confidence, to offer casual compliments with such ease.

He didn't understand it.

He hadn't mastered it. Not even with Uraraka.

He could look her in the eye and tell her she was strong enough to fight through whatever shit the world threw at her- he could do that- but he couldn't tell her he liked her smile.

Or her laugh.

Or that her hair was, in fact, cute.

"Thanks," she said, a little shyly, but she was genuinely pleased. Katsuki could tell.

And Shitty Hair was right.

And she had changed her hair.

She had lip gloss too.

He wanted to tell her she looked cute, too. But he didn't know how. He was a coward, really. So all he could manage when she looked at him was a nod and an awkward wave of his hand.

*Why had she changed it?*

*What did this mean?*

Girls did stuff like that. He knew. But still, he was sure there was a reason.

"You changed your hair."

*You've got to be fucking kidding me*, thought Katsuki, his eyes narrowing in on Icy-Hot as he approached Uraraka. "It's very stylish and attractive."

Even fucking Icy-Hot, that alien freak, could sack up long enough to say something nice. SO what the hell was wrong with him?

###

"Why the hell did you change your hair?!"

It came out as almost an accusation- shouted at her as she jumped down from the treadmill beside him. Her waves were mostly gone by

now, but the evidence was still there at the soft ends of her locks. She looked up from the towel she used to pat her face dry.

Fuck.

She looked almost shy and unsure.

She reached up and touched the ends, biting her lip anxiously.

“I was- uh- trying something.”

His brow furrowed in frustration.

That wasn’t an answer.

“Yeah, but why?” He jumped down from his treadmill, wiping the gratuitous sweat from his own forehead, and stood in front of her.

“Do I need a reason?” she asked, looking up at him, the shyness battling with her stubbornness.

*Hmmm...maybe he should have just said something nice about her hair.*

“Jeez,” he said. “Don’t get pissy; I was just asking.”

*Were they really about to fight about hair?*

“You said it like you were annoyed,” she snapped back.

*Yup, they were about to fight about hair.*

“Tch...I wasn’t annoyed.”

He was confused. And when he was confused, he got irritated. That wasn’t new.

He was confused, AND she was cute.

And his feelings were always weird about her, even when she *wasn’t* looking all cute with a new hairstyle.

“It was just weird...” he started, only realizing after he said it that he shouldn’t have.

Her eyebrows furrowed, and he saw hurt flash in her brown eyes.

*Dammit...dammit, he hadn’t meant that.*

But...she spoke Bakugo, right? Why would she take it personal? He had said way meaner stuff to her before. Hell, he had told her she was acting like a bitch a few days ago!

This was just hair, after all!

Shit...shit...her eyes were welling up; not quite crying, but her lip was trembling, and she was something between angry and hurt.

“Fuck,” he groaned. “It’s just hair, Uraraka. Why are you being all weird about it? I just wanted to know why you changed it!”

“You said it was weird,” she snapped back.

“It’s weird that you’re being a cry baby about it,” he said. “Shave your damn head for all I care!”

She spoke Bakugo. She would know what that meant, right? She would know he *meant* that it was her hair- that she could do whatever she wanted with it, and he would still want to look at her and be around her and...

*Oh shit, she was gathering her stuff.*

She ignored him, even after he called her name, trying not to sound desperate or dumb. Because he had for sure said meaner things than that, and she always gave as good as she got.

So why was she rushing out the door now, her head bowed and stuff haphazardly hanging from her arms.

Dammit.

Dammit.

He had made her cry.

He *never* made her cry.

Fuck.

Over stupid hair.

Kirishima entered the gym, looking over his shoulder, confused, followed by Mina, both dressed for a workout and both looking confused.



“Hey bro,” said Kirishima. “What was that about?”

He didn’t get a chance to answer before Pinky marched over to him, eyes blazing dangerously.

“You asshole,” she snapped, slapping his arm hard.

“Owww,” he protested. “The fuck are you...”

“Stop being a dummy,” she said, slapping him again.

He glared down at her, readying to catch her hand if she slapped at him again. “Better lay the fuck off right the fuck now, Pinky, or I swear to god...”

She raised a hand, unafraid, ready to smack him again, but Shitty Hair trotted up behind her, pulling her back out of reach of Katsuki’s sparking palms.

“Woa...woa...woa...” he said, his tone deescalating. “Everyone just calm down. What happened?”

“Nothing,” he yelled, frustration popping into his voice. “I have no fucking idea. I asked her why she changed her hair.”

Shitty Hair chewed on his words for a moment. “Okay,” he said tentatively. “That’s not so...”

“Did you compliment it?” asked Ashido, crossing her arms angrily.

“Well, no,” he said. “I never compliment hair. It’s hair!”

Kirishima made a cringe face. “Wwwell,” he said. “It’s not just hair, because you commented. If you comment, you have to compliment.”

“Says fucking who!?”

“Says common fucking decency,” snapped Racoon-Eyes.

“I just asked her why she changed it,” he repeated, but she looked unconvinced. “And said it was weird,” he muttered in confession.

“ASSHOLE!”

He braced himself for another smack, but Kirishima pulled his girlfriend back into him.

"I meant that it was weird that she changed it," said Katsuki, trying to explain himself for some reason that he wasn't sure of. "Not that her hair was weird! Jesus fucking Christ! It's. Just. Hair!"

She glared daggers at him.

"Go apologize," she ordered, her voice low and lethal. "And tell her, she looks cute as a damn button!"

"I never said she didn't!" Katsuki wanted to rip his own fucking hair out. Everyone's hair. He'd rather everyone be bald than have to speak or hear another word about hair. "She was cute before she changed her hair!"

Racoon-Eyes rolled her eyes. "This is soooo not about the hair," she said, looking up to the heavens as though she was dealing with a prized idiot right now.

Maybe she was.

"Go apologize," she repeated, pointing toward the door like a mother sending her bratty child to their room. "Now!"

He wanted to say no, just to spite her. But honestly, he had been just a few seconds away from chasing after her when Shitty Hair and Pinky interrupted him.

He didn't really understand what happened.

He wished she had told him, instead of running off, and he wished he has asked her or done what he really wanted to do and told her she looked good.

But he would apologize.

He had gotten better at that.

But, honestly, he hadn't really had to with Uraraka. So far, he had done pretty damn well. How was it that he could maneuver the big, traumatic stuff, but this...THIS...tripped him up?

He didn't understand it, and yet, it was so on brand.

He stormed past the two idiots. "I'm going!"

He ignored the tittering and chatting behind him as Ashido explained to, no doubt, an equally confused Shitty Hair. The difference is that

Shitty Hair had a lot more social grace than he did- though it pained him to admit it. He crossed the campus quickly and hurried to the dorms, trying to rehearse his apology, what he would say, but he continued to hit up against roadblocks because he still didn't quite understand what had happened.

He knocked on her door, rapping his knuckles hard against the wood.

"Hey, Uraraka, open up!"

"Go away!"

Her voice was muffled, but he could tell she had been crying.

"Shit," he groaned. "Come on, Uraraka! Open up the damn door and fucking talk to me because I have no idea what just happened."

"You were rude," she yelled back.

"I'm always rude!" He offered, as though that was a defense.

He waited for a moment for some response, but there was only a muffled sound.

"Didn't catch that, Uraraka," he said, letting his forehead drop against the door.

"Not to me," she called back, still sad but a different tone, somewhat softer, and it made his heart clench in his chest.

He sighed and leaned heavily on the door.

"Fuck...I'm...I'm sorry for whatever I did," he said. "Just...change bothers me, and I wanted to know the reason, but..." he hit his forehead lightly against the wood again. "I'm sorry."

He was about to go, to respect the boundary of her still-closed door. He was pretty sure this wouldn't kill what was a pretty solid relationship, but still, she probably needed a little time. Then he heard the sound of the knob turning and then the door opening a crack. He pushed it open and looked inside as she hurried back to her bed and jumped onto it, her back to him as she turned on her side.

It would almost be cute if he wasn't currently wrestling with how he fucked up.

He crossed the room toward her bed, sheepish and unsure.

“Look, Uraraka,” he said. “I don’t know...”

“I know,” she snapped. “I know you don’t know and...” she let out a breath and curled in on herself slightly; he could see she was holding one of her pillows tight to her chest. He sighed.

“Do you want me to go?”

“No,” she pouted. “I wouldn’t have opened the door if I wanted that.”

He stood in the middle of her room, awkward and unsure of where she wanted him.

Should he sit on her bed?

His eyes narrowed on her.

Were those new sheets?

He wouldn’t ask- he was currently on thin ice as it was when it came to commenting on all these weird changes. And how was he supposed to know? Maybe the sheets were also about more than sheets.

Apparently, he should approach everything with the assumption that he was an idiot had no idea what was really happening.

He opted to sit on the edge of her bed. He took his shoes off and tucked one leg under the other, waiting on her to speak.

“It’s stupid,” she muttered- almost apologetic.

Ugh, that would be so much easier- just let her go all apologetic and be done with it.

But he didn’t want a repeat of this. He wanted to know what he did to set her off, and he found it odd that she didn’t tell him. She was usually pretty communicative with him on stuff like this.

So why was this different?

“Come on, Uraraka,” he said. “It’s probably not stupid; I’m just an idiot sometimes...”

“My therapist,” she said, voice strained. “Thought...I’m having... problems...”

“Problems?” he repeated after a small pause. *Were they talking about*

*hair still?*

“With body image and confidence...and...connecting with myself,” she groaned, burying her face in her pillow. “...in a natural teenage way.”

Fuck.

It was about more than hair.

And he was an asshole.

“I don’t feel like a girl, and when I do, I feel gross about it.”

*Shit.*

Raccoon-Eyes should have hit him harder- really put her weight behind it.

“So...she told me to try things, small things that made me...” she groaned again, like it physically pained her to talk about this. “Feel pretty? Or confident? Or whatever...”

He looked over his shoulder; he could see the pink tinge on the back of her neck. “Shit,” he muttered, rubbing his hands over his face, frustration mounting inside of him.

“You didn’t say anything mean, Katsuki,” she said, her voice small. “I was just feeling hypersensitive, about it and when you were asking me about it, I...I don’t know...”

She was trying- not trying, being- she was being brave.

And because he was an emotionally constipated shit, he had really blown it.

“Uraraka...” He heard her roll over until she was facing him. “I’m sorry.”

“There was no way for you to know,” she said. “It all feels silly now when I say it out loud. I think my reaction had a lot to do with my own anxiety about the whole thing than with your reaction.”

He maneuvered slightly, so he was sitting on the bed, back against the headboard. He lifted an arm for her, and she scooted into his side, finding a favorite spot at his ribs, arm slung around his waist. He brought a hand up and ran it gingerly through her sweaty, salty

tangles.

“It does look cute.”

Fuck, his face was going to explode.

“You don’t have to say that, Katsuki,” she said, laughing lightly into his shirt. “Really, I’m just...”

“Oi,” he snapped. “I’m talking now.” She smirked into his sweaty black tank. “It looked cute as hell.” He was going to die. His soul was a second from leaving his body entirely. But... “I just...stuff like isn’t really in my wheelhouse. I don’t...” well, he usually didn’t notice, but he did notice with her.

“I know,” she said, squeezing him. “I could shave my head for all you care.”

“Tch... I meant- fuck- just that I think you’re...” if Icy-Hot could do this, then so could he. “I think you’re cute all the time. I thought you were cute when you dropped a stadium on my head.” His voice dropped, awkward and reluctant. He didn’t know all of what he felt, but surely- surely- she knew or at least had some idea of the singular space she occupied in his life. That, yes, she was his friend- maybe his best friend.

But even that didn’t quite cover it- not when he would pretty much be anything that she wanted him to be for her.

Friend.

Coach.

Sparring partner.

Biggest fucking fan.

Tutor.

Defender.

And if she ever got to a place where she wanted him to hold her hand- well, he’d do that too.

But he didn’t know how to say that.

So, it just came out as “you’d be cute even if you were bald.”

He could hear the intake of breath from her as she cuddled a little closer to him. "Thank you, Katsuki."

He grumbled non-committedly. "Are you done being mad at me?" he asked.

"Hmmm...I guess," she said, gripping him tighter.

"Good, then can we have dinner and get started on math, because I know you haven't done that yet."

She swatted him. "I looked at him!"

"Tch...looking ain't doin'!"

She mimicked him with indecipherable but mocking words. He let his hand drop against the sheets beneath him. He rolled his eyes but didn't respond. But as he shifted to get up, his hands fell against the sheet.

"Are these new sheets?" he asked.

She suddenly sat up, eyes wide and with a hint of a blush on her cheeks. Suddenly she was shoving him off of the bed. "Oh my god, yes," she shrieked, rolling him off. "Get off!"

He laughed and let himself be thrown off the bed dramatically.

"You're so fucking weird," he said.

"You said that already," she said, her hands on her hips as she went onto her knees to glare at him. "Now go make me some food! And it better be something yummy after being such a jerk!"

"You said you forgave me," he said.

"Yeah," she said. "And then you got gross boy sweat all over my sheets!"

"Please," he said. "You love my sweat."

She glared at him.

But he wasn't wrong.

"I'm gonna shower, and then I'll meet you down there, yeah?"

She nodded, still sitting on his bed, and he breathed an internal sigh of relief that they were back to normal. Though he had no fucking idea why new sheets would make her blush like that.

But he wasn't going to push his luck today.

###

A couple of weeks in and Ochako was surprised to find that the experiment was, actually, going pretty well. When Dr. Shoko had brought it up, Ochako had felt almost sick over it. But, now, slowly- she was beginning to feel the outward expressions seep into her inner feelings.

They were- as always- a couple of snags.

Anything more than lip gloss and mascara was too much. She thought makeup looked beautiful on her friends- but it always made her feel melty and thick, and the sensation of the stage makeup dripping down her face was always so intrusive.

Something she felt in her bones.

The visceral sensations stayed firm in her body.

The thick cake of the powder.

The bristles of the brush on her cheeks.

The rough scrub on her skin.

The brush of a skirt on the back of her legs.

But the rest of it was...it was good, especially when she listened to her body when it told her she needed to scale back or could lean in.

It was right so much of the time.

She just had to learn to listen.

The list of things she liked about herself was hard. She could lie, say stuff that she knew she was supposed to say, but that she knew- in her heart- that she didn't feel love for her.

Her smile (*so tentative- no cheeks* ).

Her eyes ( *dull and too big in her thin face* ).



Her mind ( *slow and sluggish and constantly distracted and tired* ).

Her compassion ( *but she was cranky and mean 80% of the time- she snapped at Deku like he was a buzzing fly and not a friend who was checking on her* ).

Her laugh ( *well, she supposed it was starting to sound like her again* ).

She danced in her room ( *not sexy, more goofy, and jumpy than anything else, but she decided that was okay* ).

Mina and Tsu had gone with her to the mall after therapy, where she picked out a soft cotton pair of black boy short panties. Not sexy ( *Mina assured her that they were, but also that it was about how good she felt in them* ).

But the thongs and lace made her skin crawl and her blood chill. Too much. Too much, too soon.

She tried to look at herself- naked but immediately balked. It still wasn't her.

Except she *knew* that it was.

She knew she wasn't going to be able to hate her body back into health.

She had to love it as it was.

Nurture it as it was.

Scarred and hurt, carrying trauma in it that she wished it didn't have to.

But she needed to love it still.

But her reflection was still eerie- and always made her disassociate, distance, from the girl looking back at her. But that was okay, because Tsu came and slept in her room that night, and they watched a rom-com, filled with flirty, easy, sexual tensions and comfort.

And she held herself through the night- trying to whisper apologies to her body- to the places that she hated.

Trying to make it right.

###

She woke screaming or choking. She couldn't tell.

She just knew that she couldn't breathe.

She squeezed her eyes shut, and she saw Li; saw the faces of the dying and the dead in front of her.

She heard jeers and grunts, and felt hot breath in her ear and hands tugging painfully at her hair. When she laid back down, her hand on her chest, feeling the beat of her heart under her palm, she gripped the soft, clean sheets below her, rubbing her thumb over the fabric-reminding her body where she was.

She cried.

Because she was tired and hurt and the ache in her chest so damn deep it was hard to breathe.

Because she wanted to be better.

But better was different than she had ever thought. Better would look different, and sound different, and feel different, and taste different than she ever imagined.

She would learn to love that better too.

# You Caught Me

## Chapter Summary

Ochako sees a familiar face and gets to feel like a hero again- Katsuki is bad at feelings in this chapter, because he's a worried bean.

Cw:

Attempted suicide (not any of the main characters and the attempt is not successful nor is it graphic, promise) scroll down a bit for the means of attempt if that will help you deal with any potentially triggering anxiety.

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A character throws themselves off a building, but Ochako is fast.

She was on her way back to the bus when she passed the jumbotron, usually flashing with ads and gossip and interviews with celebrities, but today she was paused by the “live and unfolding” ribbon across the bottom, and the distressed crowds gathered around it- gasping and clinging and pointing.

Ochako’s eyes went up to the screen, to the reporter standing in front of an ornate building. “We are on the scene of a hostage situation at Imperial Plaza Suites where an unknown quirked individual has taken 15 captives to the roof of this towering skyscraper.”

She narrowed her eyes at the footage taken from the helicopter. 15 hostages were standing along the narrow ledge of the roof- they weren’t tied or restrained in any way, it seemed.

The footage flashed to a face- an angry, twisted face snarling on screen. Ochako felt her heart stutter at the sight.

It wasn't a villain.

He was- he was a kid.

Well, older than her, she thought, but still a kid; it was a face she recognized. It was thinner, older, more weathered, yellow hair was matted and obscuring, but she knew that face. He had been abducted not long after her. He had cried the whole first week.

She had looked him in the eyes in that hole. She had opened his cage and coaxed him out. He had put his arms around her neck when she had floated them to the top.

Fuck.

He was standing on the ledge, screaming into the wind that roared at such a height.

She remembered his quirk too.

He manipulated iron- even small amounts.

She could see the strain of the hostages as they fought against invisible bindings- held still and unmoving by the manipulated iron in their bodies. She was running before she could stop herself- activating her quirk for speed and higher jumps, so she could bypass the crowds of people with ease.

She closed her eyes tight and saw the boy's face; so angry and fierce, yes, but she could see more there- more than what was showing on the screen.

So much fear and desperation. He wasn't just dangerous.

He had lived.

They had lived.

He couldn't do this- not after everything, not after they had gotten out.

Had anyone helped him?

Any of them?

She felt a pang of guilt. She hadn't thought of them- except for Li. She had barely managed to keep her head up above the water; she barely

had room for her own suffering, let alone anyone else's, but now she was feeling it keenly in her soul.

She had people looking out for her. Had he? Or was this kid like Li?

Alone?

God, she couldn't imagine. She brushed the cold tears away before she landed in front of the building, surrounded by heroes and officers. It seemed that they were holding off, what with the hostages being held so close to the edge, like chess pieces waiting to be moved.

"Detective Tsukauchi!"

She ran toward the familiar face. The detective turned toward her voice and then looked surprised to see her running toward him.

"Uraraka," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I saw on the news..." he rubbed his forehead tiredly. "He was one of the hostages."

He nodded grimly. "Yeah, we know."

"So, you know his quirk?" she asked.

"No," he answered, surprising her. "He left the hospital- escaped out the window before anyone had the chance to talk to him."

"He can manipulate iron," she said. "Even the trace amount in people's bodies."

Detective Tsukauchi let out a frustrated sigh. "So, you're saying..."

"That they are all puppets up there," she said with a hurried now. "Yeah. Yeah, he can walk them off at any point."

"We'll have to take him out from a distance then," he said, more to himself than to her.

"No," she protested, suddenly and without thought. "He's fast, if you..."

"We have snipers," another officer offered.

"No," she pleaded, her voice desperate. "You can't...you can't. He's traumatized. He isn't bad, he's..."

“Looks to me that he’s about to murder ten people,” countered the officer. Ochako turned back to Detective Tsukauchi, ignoring the other officer.

“Let me talk to him!”

The detective immediately shook his head. “No, Uraraka, it’s way too dangerous.”

“I have a provisional license,” she said adamantly. She looked up. She didn’t know if this was the right thing to do; maybe shooting the kid from a distance would be better- save the most people. But still...

“I saved his life,” she said. “I can talk to him. I know what...I know his headspace right now, and if you frighten him, he’ll jump and take those hostages with him.”

Everyone down here was worried about the hostages.

She understood that- she did.

But no one was worried about *him*.

And maybe that was how they ended up in this position in the first place.

No one was worried about him.

She wondered if that had been the case his whole life. So many people had worried about her. And only just now was she feeling the weight and power of that.

“Please,” she said softly. “I know him. I can. I can do this and have a sniper or whatever ready, but I’m telling you if he goes down, he’s taking a few hostages with him anyway, so please...let me try and save everyone.”

Tsukauchi sighed and nodded. “All right,” he said. “All right. But if he uses his quirk on you, hold a blink for five seconds, and our guy will know to take him out, okay?”

She exhaled and nodded. “Thank you.”

She ran through the police barricade and activated her quirk again. She could do this. She gripped the textured bricks and windows and ledges to push her nearly weightless body up along the side of the building, guiding herself to the top.

She would save him.

She would.

And he would get help.

She would make sure he got help.

He shouldn't be alone.

No one should be alone.

Someone should have saved him.

She kicked and pulled and scurried up the slick glass, holding tighter as the roaring wind picked up around her, threatening to blow her off course, but she remained tight against the skyscraper. She blinked furiously as the wind whipped in her face. When she got to the top, she gripped the ledge and threw her leg over, deactivating her quirk and landing softly on the concrete surface.

His back was to her as he stood on the ledge, looking out over the city. She could just make out some of his screaming over the wind as she moved closer.

"And this is the death that will befall the fat, the rich, those who use their position to step on the neck so the poor. Their money will not save them. They will die the same as me! We will all die the same!"

"Hey," she called out as she inched closer. He reared around, his eyes blazing at her intrusion. She held her hands up higher, showing him her lack of weapons. "How about a little familiar courtesy, huh?"

His fierce, angry eyes darted around- up close, she could even more clearly see the confusion and exhaustion and fear there.

He was in the midst of a breakdown.

She wondered how long he had tried to stay the demons- how many sleepless nights he had spent alone, how long he had fought the monster growing inside of him and leaking poison into his whole body.

A million things could have happened- should have happened- to stop this.

"Do you remember me?" she asked, stepping closer.

“You’re the gravity girl.”

She nodded, eyes roaming the hostages, assessing their state. They were dressed in glitzy jewels, dresses, and nice, tailored suits- though now they were ripped and billowing.

“Yeah,” she said. “I’m Ochako Uraraka.”

His mouth formed a tight line. “Have you come to join me then? Come to be the swift hand of justice on those who exploit, consume, and violently take without regard?”

“Is that what you’re doing?”

“Someone must be punished,” he spat. “Someone must be punished for the blood that was spilled, for what was done to us.” He turned his back on her, and she seized a bit. He was standing so close to the edge, the tips of his toes hanging off. “Today, the world will see that our insides, our guts, our brains are indistinguishable.”

His voice trembled with rage.

Could this have been her, had she not been so lucky to have the friends and family and people that she did?

*“So many people let you down.”*

Aizawa had said those words to her- she wondered if they would mean the same to him.

“Can you...can I know your name?” she asked. “I don’t think you ever told me?”

He looked thin, thinner than even when they were in the cages- he looked ground down and worn to his bones. He was shaking violently in the wind.

“My name isn’t important,” he said. “I am here to punish. I see their wicked blood. They want to manipulate and bend the world to their will, and now they will learn what it means to be powerless.”

Powerless.

“Used.”

She swallowed the emotions forming at the base of her throat.



“Cast-off.”

No one was there to catch him.

“Violated.”

“Still,” she interrupted. “I would still like to know your name if you don’t mind sharing it with me?”

His eyes narrowed, and she prayed that wasn’t the wrong thing to say. He looked at her for a moment- frustrated and confused. Like he was trying to sort her out.

“Tomihiko,” he said, his voice cold and absent like it was just a word, one he had no attachment to.

“Tomihiko,” she repeated carefully. “Thank you. Do you mind if I step a little closer? It’s hard to hear.”

For a moment- for the quickest of moments- she saw something that almost looked like annoyance- it put her in mind of Katsuki and how he would look at her when she was being particularly pesky. It was so very human.

He nodded- small and nearly imperceptible.

“Thank you,” she said, stepping closer to the ledge, standing only a few feet away from him now, she could hear the crying and the whimpering from the hostages even more clearly now.

“Aren’t you cold?” she asked, looking up at his bare torso. “I’m freezing.” He didn’t answer but continued to look out across the city. “Or do you not feel cold anymore,” she asked. “I...I know I had trouble feeling anything in my body for a while. It was weird.” She looked up at him. “Say, Tomihiko?” He looked briefly over his shoulder at her. “Were you like hungry all the time when you were in there?” He didn’t respond, but she could see something shifting in his posture. “I was,” she continued, holding this mostly one-sided conversation. “I was hungry all the time. And then when I got out...”

“Couldn’t eat a damn thing,” he growled, his voice dropping to something that she thought was possibly his real voice.

“Yeah,” she affirmed, nodding her head. “Exactly.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. “They deserve to be punished.”

She was standing right by the ledge now, behind him and slightly to the side so he could see her in his periphery. "Damn right, they do," she said. "But the people who did it aren't here, Tomihiko. These aren't them."

"All people like them," he spat. Her heart lurched when he spun on his heels on the ledge to face her fully, his movements twitchy and frantic. One misstep, and they would all be dead.

"Everything is rotten to its core," he said. "When the innocent become toys, and the vulnerable becomes lambs to be slaughtered, someone must be punished, and we can't trust that they will. So we have to do it ourselves."

She felt a cold, wet tear slide down her cheek, but she didn't dare close her eyes to keep the tears at bay; she didn't want any snipers to misread her.

"You're not wrong, Tomihiko," she said. "We were let down. And it is all broken and horrible and terrible, but you can't fix it if you're dead."

"I will start a revolution."

"Tomihiko," she said softly. "Look at me." The man- the boy- hurt and empty, looked up at her. "I *know* . Trust me, I know how much you are hurting. I..." she brought a hand to her chest. "I know how much it hurts, how sick and exhausted you feel." Another tear fell, and his eyes traced it with rapt fascination. "I'm angry all the time- every day I'm angry. They tried to kill us, Tomihiko. They did their best to kill us. We fought tooth and nail to see the light of day, but I can't tell you how many times I wanted to crawl back into that hole. But...but they dug that hole for us, Tomihiko. Don't let them get the final say in your life." And then she extended a hand to him. His eyes snapped down to her palm- looking utterly confused about what to do with it, wondering what her possible intentions could be.

"You're not alone," she said. "I can help you. I swear, there can be more for us. I know it. So don't let them decide that this is where your story ends."

He looked up from her hand to look at her again. God, he was so young. He was a kid like her. So young and so wrecked.

"Please," she said, keeping her hand extended. "Just let them go. Let them go, and we can leave together, okay? Because I want you to

live.” She did; she wanted it so much. More than she thought she could want anything, she wanted this boy to live. “You haven’t done anything you can’t take back yet. You haven’t done anything that can’t be fixed yet, if you let them go, right now.”

His lip trembled, jaw clenching, the muscles in his neck straining.

“If you jump now, you won’t live long enough to see the asshole who actually hurt us brought to justice,” she said. “If you jump now, you will not be a revolutionary- you will just be dead. So please...” she flexed her fingers. “Take my hand.”

Tomihiko’s shoulders shook, and then like a feral animal, a sound her heart had made so many times over and over, he screamed into the air- so loud, so frightening, so damning, so deep with anguish she had to fight the urge to flinch away. But she held his gaze, and then without preamble or explanation, the hostages stepped from the ledge, their bodies shuddering before they were released onto their knees.

Ochako breathed a sigh of relief. “Good, thank you, Tomihiko. Now just take my hand.”

He turned back around, looking down over the edge, down the towering distance from the roof to the ground.

“Tomihiko,” she said, her voice pleading. “Please...”

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice ragged and raw and filled with shame. “I can’t. I can’t.”

“Tomihiko... please...please don’t.”

“I can’t...” a violent sob ripped through him. “I’m sorry, but I can’t.” He looked over his shoulder at her, trying to shape his mouth into some kind of smile, only for it to become a pained grimace.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Please, take my hand,” she insisted, shaking it at him.

He turned away from her and looked over the ledge. “...F...for trying to save me.”

She had a moment to decide, and she didn’t hesitate. She had not acted in time to save Li. She wouldn’t hesitate this time.

The wind bit at her face and shoulders as she nose-dived over the edge

after him, activating her quirk on herself, manipulating her own gravitational field, the way the pull of the earth interacted with her body, willing herself faster, harder as she sped to him like a bullet.

His eyes were closed- accepting. He didn't see her.

He needed more time.

He deserved help like she had gotten before he decided that the world was better without him, before he decided it wasn't worth it. His eyes didn't snap open until she collided with him, her weight sending them both flying and spinning through the air.

He thrashed and screamed against her, throwing his hands and elbows, trying to shake her off. His head collided painfully with her face, only adding to the nausea. But she didn't have time to indulge any of that- she held tight. She needed to stop them. She released her quirk on herself and activated it on him so she could weigh them both down to the ground. He was screaming at her, protesting with his voice and his body, but it was too late. He was weightless now, weightless and safe. She activated her quirk on herself again when she was a few feet away so she could land, but his flailing had thrown off her landing, sending them both tumbling roughly across the concrete. But she clung to him all the same- even as he bucked and screamed and spat and cursed at her.

She staggered onto all fours, crouched over his body, her vision swimming.

"Tomihiko," she said, grabbing his wrists and trying to force them down. She would prefer not to manhandle him in this state, but she didn't want him to hurt himself or anyone else. "It's okay," she assured. "It's okay. I'm right here. You're not alone."

She heard footsteps behind her, several officers running to surround them. She looked over her shoulders. "Wait!" She screamed. "Wait a minute, just back off!"

She turned back toward the boy. "I know you hate me."

He howled and tried to throw her off him, but she held firm, her added muscle and weight and training with Katsuki giving her more than enough of an advantage. "I know you hate me, but you have time now! You have time."

He was sobbing now, hot violent tears streaming down his face as he

finally let her push his arms back down to the ground, pinning him beneath her.

“It’s too late for me,” he howled. Ang god, he believed it in his bones, she could tell feel the ache of it in his trembling body. “It’s too late for me! I can’t get out. I can’t...please, please let me die!”

“It’s not too late,” she said. “It’s not. It’s not too late, Tomihiko. I promise you. Please, try before you give up. I want you to try.”

He stopped his bucking and thrashing for a moment, paused by something- the one-two drop of tears that weren’t his splattering on his face.

Ochako’s tears.

For him.

Suddenly, her hand was in his, his grip hard, grasping, reaching for something.

He was pinned beneath her, gasping and angry and desperate.

Alive.

Fighting to breathe.

###

He can’t.

Katsuki couldn’t even stay in the common area when she arrived back at school- dropped off by a police escort. All of her peers had been gathered there to watch. Because that was all he could fucking do.

Watch.

He couldn’t look at her, because his heart rate hasn’t gone down since he watched her throw herself off a fucking skyscraper.

Fucking diving.

Without a safety net.

After a fucking villain.

Maybe...maybe he could understand had it been a hostage, but a

villain?!

A villain with a quirk that clearly allowed him to manipulate the bodies of other people from the look of the hostages.

Could have prevented her from activating her quirk.

Idiot.

Dumbass.

It was stupid- he kept screaming internally- so fucking dumb and unneeded. He screamed loud so that it was louder than the heart-stopping, gut-wrenching dread he had felt when she had jumped off that building.

Yes, he fucking respected her. He knew better than most what she was capable of.

That was partly why this feeling roaring inside of him was even harder to contend with- because he *did* know her, he *did* respect her, she *was* a hero- but now, for some reason, he could hardly breathe, and his palms were sweaty, and he wanted to blow something up.

This was why friends were a fucking waste.

This right here.

Because she had been reckless, and he had to feel something about it- he could respect from a distance; he could admire badassery at arm's length.

And now all that swirled together confusingly in his gut; the footage of her hurtling downward at breakneck speeds playing over and over again in his head.

What if the villain had grabbed her hands; knocked her out? Did whatever freaky blood control thing he did on the hostages, according to the reporters?

So...no. He didn't wait for her along with the rest of the extras- all just as worried but ready to kiss her ass for getting lucky.

Nope.

Wasn't happening.

He was in his room for maybe an hour before he heard the knock at his door.

Maybe if he was quiet, she would just leave.

Another knock.

He held his breathe like a fucking coward.

Hiding from a girl because he was either going to scream at her or kiss her, neither felt appropriate for the moment. He heard her footsteps retreat back down the hall, and he should have felt relief, but instead, he felt panic: panic that she would get away.

That he wouldn't get to see her all day.

He opened the door and poked his head out, and she turned immediately to smile at him.

Smile at him?!

The fucking audacity!

He narrowed his gaze into a scowl. "Hey, Katsuki!"

"Tch..." it was all he could say. She raised an eyebrow. His eyes briefly went to the swollen purple flesh beneath her eyes.

"I didn't see you downstairs."

He crossed his arms. "And?"

"Uh...just...I didn't see you. I guess you heard about..."

"How you threw yourself off a building?" he spat, a bite in his voice that he couldn't quite keep at bay. Her brow furrowed, clearly confused.

"I saved people," she said slowly.

"Saved a villain," he snapped. "You had already saved the hostages, Uraraka."

Her gaze went from confused to angry in a second. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

He sneered. "Me? Nothing. Because I have two brain cells to rub

together, unlike you.”

Ochako’s mouth fell open, and she looked over her shoulder and around the hall before stomping over to him, beet red and hopping mad.

“Who the hell am I talking to right now?” she asked. “You throw yourself off of buildings on the regular!”

“With a plan, Uraraka! I always have a plan.”

She was pissed- eyes seething with an anger he hadn’t been on the receiving end of in a long time.

“So the hell did I, Katsuki,” she yelled. “I had a plan! Obviously!”

“No,” he yelled, so loud his words blew back the hair of her bangs on her forehead. “Not obviously! Because you flung yourself off a FUCKING SKYSCRAPER AFTER A VILLAIN!”

He screamed to hide the tightening in his voice. She scowled at him and stomped past him and into his room. He faltered for a moment, confused by the action.

“The hell?”

She stood in the middle of his room, arms cross and eyes brilliant and blazing, breathing heavy and loud. “Come on,” she said. “If we’re gonna scream at each other, we should do it in private!”

“Tch...I don’t wanna fight with you, Uraraka.”

“Well, you started it, Katsuki,” she yelled. “I came here because I wanted to borrow your freaking heavy-duty pain killers because my head fucking hurts, and then you started acting like an ass. So you better believe we are gonna fight.”

Katsuki wanted to shake her so badly.

Okay, maybe he just wanted to touch her. But he was mad!

He kicked the door shut behind him and stomped over to his bedside table, throwing the drawer open so aggressively it almost flew out of the desk. He snatched up his painkillers and swiped a water bottle from the desk before he stalked back over to her, throwing both into her hands. She didn’t break her own murderous glare with him, even as she unscrewed the bottle and popped two pills into her mouth.



“Now,” she said, after swallowing them down. “Tell me exactly why you’re so mad at me, Katsuki, for doing something you would have done too.”

“Wrong,” he snapped. “I would not risk my fucking life for a villain, especially with a move you have only ever practiced in a controlled environment.”

“You’re saying you didn’t think I could do it?!”

He let out an angry growl and tugged violently at his hair. “You know goddamn well I’m not saying that!”

“Then what are you saying?!”

“That it wasn’t worth the fucking risk!”

“He was a hostage too, Katsuki,” she screamed back, hot tears of frustration gathering in her eyes. “He...I saved him! He was in that place with me, and I saved him.”

“I don’t give a fuck.” He knew it was the wrong thing to say. He knew it, but he couldn’t take it back. Because, honestly, he would feel this way, whoever it was that she jumped after- and that scared the hell out of him. So he yelled. “You saved him then, and he decided to become a fucking villain and do fuck-all with the chance you gave him.”

“It’s not that simple,” she said, a hint of desperation in her voice. “Please,” she said. “Can you try to see why...that I couldn’t let him fall!? I had to go after him!”

“No, you didn’t,” he screamed, throwing his arms up in anger. “You didn’t, actually!” But something shifted in his gaze, something responding to the panic he knew was rising in his voice. “You shoulda just let him fall! He jumped, and that’s on him! Not you!”

“He’s a kid, Katsuki, and he was hurting! How can you not get that?”

“Because it makes no fucking sense! It makes no fucking sense that you would risk your life for a villain. We don’t jump when some idiot decides to throw themselves off a cliff!”

“You would have jumped for me,” she yelled, pointing at herself. “If that had been me, you would have jumped!”

His face contorted into something between a growl and a snarl-offended and affronted. "Not the fucking same thing," he declared, voice low and lethal. But she wasn't afraid of him, he knew that. She didn't need to be- she never ever needed to be afraid of him. But still... a little fear before throwing herself off a skyscraper could lengthen her life by a year or two. "You aren't him."

"But I could've been," she whispered, ragged and somewhat defeated.

"No," he growled, shaking his head. "No. You're a hero. You decided to do something good- to keep fighting. He decided to throw his fucking life away. He shouldn't need someone to catch him. He shouldn't need..."

"You caught me," she interrupted suddenly, looking down at the ground, a small tremor going through her body.

The emotions gathered between the two heroes were so thick that he felt dizzy- dizzy with anger, sick with worry and confusion, the only sound, their labored breathing, weighted with adrenaline and something else that he didn't quite know how to deal with.

"You," she whispered. "You caught me over and over and over again. You, Deku, Mina, Momo, Shoto, Tsu, Aizawa- you all caught me over and over again, even when I didn't want..." she exhaled and looked up at the ceiling, trying to reign in whatever feelings were taking her over. His hand itched to reach out to her, but he resisted. "I didn't want to die," she said. "But I didn't care if I lived." She let her forehead fall into her hand, and she shook her head. "I didn't crawl out of that hole by myself, Katsuki. I didn't, not really. I'm not that strong, Katsuki. Most of us need help. I needed help. I needed you." He inhaled sharp and shaky, trying not to be overwhelmed by all that he was feeling, by all that she was feeling as she begged him, pleaded with him, to understand. Like she *needed* him to understand.

And there was something in him that needed to give her whatever it was that she needed.

"They *destroyed* us, Katsuki. Literally destroyed our sense of identity, took our quirks, our names, our bodies. Made it impossible for us to feel safe."

She had spoken to him many times about what had happened to her, probably more than anyone else besides her therapist. But never quite like this- never with so much feeling that he could hear. At first, anytime she spoke, it was either with numb detachment that she

needed to cope, and then more recently, she would talk when she was raw, emotional, vulnerable, and without a filter, like it was life or death if she didn't speak into the world and out of her.

But this was different. Fear wasn't the loudest thing in her voice this time.

"And I was lucky, Katsuki. I was lucky because I came back to parents, to a school, to teachers, and friends who were so patient with me, who would kill for me. And I was so angry at Aizawa for not coming for me, but fuck..." she held out her arms and dropped them, a sad incredulous laugh coming out of her. "At least he was looking. I never thought for a second that he wasn't looking for me. Most..." her voice caught in her throat again, replaced by a small sob.

He stepped forward this time to pull her close- to hold her, to hug her, but she stepped away and held up her hand, stopping him. "He didn't have anyone looking for him, Katsuki. And I can't imagine what kind of hopelessness that causes." Resolved warred with the sadness in her eyes as she met his gaze. "So I jumped. He needed to know his life mattered."

She sighed, exhausted and resigned, and turned away from him, ready to go back to the door. She paused briefly and then looked over her shoulder.

"I saved a boy's life today," she said, her voice laced with disappointment. "I was a hero today, and I...I thought you'd be proud of me." The last bit she says with so much hurt that it felt a little like a sucker punch to his stomach.

Why was he so bad at this?

Why couldn't he be normal and just fucking tell her he was worried about her? Why did he have to yell and scream like an asshole because he didn't know how to cope with his feelings? Why couldn't he just tell her that it had spooked the hell out of him to see her jump like that?

She was a fucking hero- he knew that- but he didn't know how to hold that in light of their odd, complicated, multi-faceted relationship.

She was opening the door to his room when his eyes shot up. "I was afraid..." it came tumbling out his mouth before he could stop it.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

She froze at the door.

Waiting for him to continue, apparently unwilling to let him off easy this time.

Fair.

He rubbed his face desperately and jerked to move toward her, but he stopped. "Fuck," he growled. "I was afraid. I saw you fall or jump or whatever, and it was like that night Gym Gamma when we fought-like bad fought."

She turned to face him, but he couldn't bring himself to look at her. "That night, I had thought for a second that maybe you were...that you wanted...that it had gotten too bad and..." he hadn't told her that before, what had gone through his head that night he had seen her hurtling toward the ground. "And I couldn't get to you in time."

She let out a soft sigh and shut the door again. He continued to look away from her probing gaze.

He felt sick. Nervous. Naked.

Too exposed.

Did she feel like this all the time? Was working through her shit 100 times worse than this?

"And when you jumped today, I panicked. I was afraid, and anger is better than fear, so I got angry."

"Katsuki..." She reached out a hand to him, but he batted it away gently. "Katsuki," she repeated. "I..."

"And it doesn't have a damn thing to do with how I see you as a hero." He knew he sounded defensive, but he wanted her to know that had nothing to do with it. "So don't even fucking think that. You should know how I feel about you as a hero, but..." He deflated slightly, let his chin fall to his chest as he let out a frustrated sigh. "I don't know how...how to want you to be the best fucking hero that you can be and...not...not want you to get hurt. And that fucking freaked me out! Because you're right- it was badass, and a year ago, that's all I would have felt. I wouldn't be fucking going through every possible what-if and worst-case scenario that ended with you spattered all over the fucking concrete!"

This time he felt the press of her palms on either side of his face, and he didn't pull away.

"You...you were worried about me," she repeated. He made an annoyed sound, somewhere between a duh and a denial. Her thumb traced over his cheekbone, and she stepped closer into his space, so she was looking up at him, eyes filled with understanding and soft affection. "I wish you would have told me that," she whispered as she held his face, his everything, in her hands like he wasn't all scars and hard muscles and broken bones.

He grunted and shrugged.

"I..." she let her hands fall to his shoulders. "I'm sorry I worried you."

"Don't," he said, shaking his head. "Don't apologize for..."

"I'm not," she affirmed. "I'm not apologizing for what I did. I did the right thing, and I knew I could do it. But I'm your friend. I..." she paused, as if thinking of a better way to tell him whatever it was that she was trying to say. "I care so much about you, and I get it. Being friends with you and Deku is a constant battle of being amazed at how incredible you are and just hoping you don't destroy yourself."

Exhausted and drained, he let his head drop, his forehead pressing lightly against hers. "I guess," she continued shakily. "You just...you decide if it's worth it." She said it tentatively, almost like a question, with a trace of uncertainty, and that made him bristle slightly.

Sure, the thought had crossed his mind a few minutes ago that friends complicate things in a way that sometimes made him wonder if it was worth it.

But he didn't mean it.

Not even a little.

So the insecurity in her voice dissolved his uncertainty in a moment as he fixed his intense gaze on her, pulling his forehead away from her slightly so he could get a better look at her. She was so close that he could see the patterns in her bruised skin, the light dusting of freckles across her nose; he could feel her breath on his face.

And...fuck...he could have sworn her eyes went down briefly to his lips for half a second, and a small pink blush appeared on her cheeks.

He wanted to say things.

A lot of things.

To tell her, yes- it's fucking worth it.

She will always be worth it.

It never entered his mind that she wasn't- as if she made him anything other than better and stronger. But he didn't know how to say all of that. He didn't know how to feel in moderation. And he didn't want to scare her, or overwhelm her or confuse her.

He wanted her to want him too.

But not until she was ready, and if she never was...well, that would be okay.

He pulled her in tight, squeezing her firm and warm against him. He buried his face in her hair, and she raised her arms. He expected her to hug him in the way she always did- tight and around his waist, burrowing into his chest.

But even that was different. Her hands fisted the fabric of his shirt, just above his heart, tugging herself closer into him. Her breath and her eyelids fluttering against the base of his throat when she relaxed against him and sighed contentedly.

And he was sure she understood all he was saying to her now.

"Thank you for caring about me," she whispered.

He snorted into her hair. "Whatever..."

But he didn't let go.

# No One Else's

## Chapter Summary

Ochako continues to explore herself and her attraction to Katsuki. Her classmates screw up a little- but the thesis of this whole story is that everyone is doing their best, and everyone is messing up, but Ochako is finding her voice.

Kacchako fluff in this chapter abounds :)

## Chapter Notes

CW\*

Ochako continues to cope with reassociating herself with her sexuality so there is more talk about that, including discussion of masturbation

Ochako sunk into her lunge, her hips, her body, her pelvis tensing and clenching in resistance to the movement. She tried to lean into her right thigh, to relax her body. But every attempt to breathe out, to allow her body to fall into the movement, was met with a brick wall of panic and fear, a heart-dropping anxiety seizing her, a black swirling vortex in her lower body.

She felt fear.

Coiled.

Twisted up in her own body.

She let out a small whimper, and beside her, Ojiro paused, pushing back into a standing position and turning to face her. "Uraraka," he said. "If you're in pain, then..."

"No," she whimpered. "I...I'm not in pain..."

Though the sudden, traitorous tears falling down, her cheek said otherwise. "Uraraka, are you?"

She sniffed and nodded. "I'm okay."

She tried to will herself to stop resisting, to let herself sink, to fall; she wanted so badly to feel a little bit of freedom in her body, a little bit

of release. She was starting to feel it in so many places, but not here yet. Every time she tried a pose that felt vulnerable and open in this way, she felt herself begin to freeze.

Fear.

Panic.

Vulnerability.

Openness.

She let out a shaky breath and leaned against her right thigh, and breathed. She didn't know what was on the other side, but she wanted to feel it- a little bit of relief. She wanted her body to know it didn't have to hold herself like this all the time.

Gentle.

Calm.

This was her body. It was hers—no one else's.

She breathed into it; as she felt the joints in her hips give just a little bit more, a pocket of relief flooded into her. She breathed into her body, into herself, words of comfort, words that she had been building over the last few weeks, words that had been settling slowly into her blood and bones as she moved, trained, connected, and learned to like herself again.

Progress was so slow- so slow it was easy to feel like there was none happening. But now, here, she found herself sinking lower into her warrior pose, communicating over and over again to herself, to her body...

*"You're safe."*

*"You're loved."*

*"You belong- only to yourself."*

*"I'm sorry."*

She was.

*"I'm trying to love you better."*



She leaned forward, pushing into her thigh, feeling the stretch and release and unraveling in the pit of her stomach, and another tear fell as she felt something open and settle in her body. She looked sideways, briefly, at Ojiro, who had continued with his own flow, not wanting to interrupt her. He looked over briefly, ascertaining that she was okay to continue, and then turned back, understanding of some kind in his eyes.

She blinked, and a few more tears tumbled free and into the corner of her mouth. She cried the whole session- soft tears that she didn't question.

She was starting to trust her body.

Trust that it knew what she needed.

###

"So...so how...do I...do it?"

Mina sat cross-legged on Ochako's bed. "Well," she said. "It depends, do you want quick and direct, or slow and relaxing?"

"Uh..." Ochako bit her lip. "I don't know."

She had never actually done it before. She didn't know what masturbation was supposed to feel look like or how it was supposed to go. She had no idea where to start.

"Well," said Mina, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "Your goal is to experience sexuality in a context that you're in charge of, right?"

"Yeah," she said- loving Mina so much for the comfort and the casual way she spoke about it like it truly wasn't a big deal at all.

"Then I would suggest maybe making it special," said Mina. "Wear your new underwear during the day, get some warming lube, take a nice hot shower, and light one of Momo's candles and just touch yourself and see what you like. I'm assuming you don't want any toys for the first time, right?"

"Yeah," she said. "I think that would be too much for me."

"For sure, then just use your fingers," said Mina. "See what feels good for you- what pressure and speed you like. Try and let it be fun if you can."

Fun.

That was hard to imagine, but...maybe.

Maybe it could be fun. She was getting better, getting stronger every day.

Maybe.

She felt the press of Mina's hand against hers. "You know you don't have to do this. It's totally your..."

"I want to," she said. "I...I want to try. I've uh actually sort of tried a few times since coming back, but it was too hard to get into the right state of mind, but I think I'd like to try again."

Mina nodded and let go of her hand. "Do you want any reading material or videos to help you out?"

Ochako smiled and shook her head. "No, not this time. I think I just want to try it on my own this time, and then maybe as I get a feel for it, I'll try a few different things."

"Sure," said Mina. "And please, if you have any questions or need to talk before or after, let me know?"

Such an odd offer, but it made her feel good all the same.

That day after therapy, she made a quick detour to the drug store. Shoko was supportive of her choice of activity for the night, which made her feel slightly embarrassed but was also affirming.

She wasn't a deviant.

She wasn't a pervert.

She wasn't bad.

This was normal, and she needed a little normal.

Healthy. She needed a little healthy in her life.

She even purchased some warming lube that a couple of the girls had recommended as their favorite. She wasn't sure if she would be able to make the purchase, but the girl at the counter looked bored and check-out and only a little older than Ochako, and if she had thought it was weird, it didn't show on her face.

Ochako also indulged in her favorite stress chocolate- she deserved it.

When she arrived back at the dorms, she took the shortcut to the balcony so no one would ask about her bag. She had a few more things to do today, including finishing the outline for her essay that she had sworn up and down to Katsuki that she was “almost done with.” But she was taking her chocolate with her!

###

She was being weird, plus she was eating her stress chocolate. It didn't seem like therapy had been particularly bad that day- her smile wasn't fake; she wasn't withdrawn. But she was definitely distracted.

Distracted and cute.

And his stupid fucking crush was getting too damn loud.

She had taken to playing with her hair- loose curls and tousled waves framed her face and curved around her ears and over her eyes. And, out of nowhere, she had started smelling like strawberries on the regular, and that was definitely new.

Okay, maybe he was distracted too.

But, dammit, he wasn't gonna write her fucking outline for her, so she better focus.

Well, he probably wouldn't.

He wouldn't.

He would NOT write this essay.

“Katsuki?”

He jerked up defensively and looked down at her at the other end of the couch. Her cheeks were pink- they were more often now, and that made him happy.

“Are you okay?” she asked, cocking her head slightly.

“Yes,” he snapped. “I'm not being weird.”

God, this was embarrassing.

Her eyes squinted in confusion. “I didn't say you were...”

“You’re weird,” he muttered, but her smirk and eye roll told him she didn’t take it too seriously. She poked at his thigh with her foot, but when he looked up to snap at her, she was already typing away at her laptop. He looked down at the offending toes. But he just exhaled in frustration and turned back to his own notes.

They sat in companionable silence for a bit until Deku and Icy Hot interrupted; in that loud dramatic way, they did everything.

“I said you should go see Recovery Girl,” scolded Icy Hot. Ochako, of fucking course, looked up and over the back of the couch.

“Deku,” she cried, setting her laptop aside. “Are you hurt?”

“No,...no,” he said. “I’m fine. I just miscalculated the force in a hit, and...” he held up a wrist, swollen and bruised.

“Tch...dumbass...”

She kicked Katsuki; this time, his hand shot out and gripped her ankle. “Knock that shit off,” he growled, but she just rolled her eyes and pulled her ankle away before turning to set her feet on the ground.

“Why aren’t you seeing Recovery Girl?”

“The old bat probably won’t see him anymore,” said Katsuki before looking over his shoulder. “Did you max out your dumbass visit punch card, Deku?”

Deku rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “Yeah, kind of...”

Ochako rolled her eyes at Katsuki’s smirk. “I’ll get you an icepack,” she said, standing up and moving to the kitchen.

Fuck. He was going to do this outline for her, wasn’t he?

Ochako trotted toward the kitchen, Icy Hot followed after her. *Why the hell did Deku need two nurses?*

Katsuki stomped out the grumbling and focused them into a glare at Deku, who sat in the chair beside the couch, pointedly ignoring Katsuki’s gaze. He turned back down toward his computer-considering slamming his laptop shut and leaving. He didn’t want to sit around with the Dekusquad.

He liked Uraraka, but that didn’t mean he would suffer through something as inhumane as chit-chat with Deku. And he was about to

do just that. He turned on the couch to tell her that he was going to go up to his room and she could meet him there if she wanted to keep working, but then he caught sight of perhaps the weirdest fucking thing he had ever seen.

Ochako was bent over, rooting around for meds, and Half-n-Half-Shoto-fucking-Todoroki- soon to be neither hot nor cold, because he would be dead- was staring, out-right fucking staring, at her ass; head cocked to the side like a cocker spaniel just taking in the sights.

Wasn't he into guys?

Specifically Deku?

A low growl formed in his throat. Here he was, questioning every touch, every hold, every position of his hand, every fucking gaze, and Icy Hot was just gawking like fucking Mineta.

Well, not like Mineta. In fact, there was nothing lecherous in the way the idiot was looking at Ochako. If anything, it looked soft.

But, dammit, he had another thing coming if he thought he could stare at her when she was all...

"Uraraka," said the freak. "You're rounder now."

What the fuck?! What the actual fuck?!

He was going to explode!

Combust.

Die and take Icy-Hot with him.

"Hmmm..." she asked, turning toward Todoroki, who did not look the least bit nervous or *caught*. "Did you say something, Shoto?"

"Your roundness is coming back."

Her mouth opened in a stuttering response. "Shoto," squeaked Deku, jumping up. "You... you can't say stuff like that!"

"Damn fucking straight..." said Katsuki through gritted teeth; he could feel his temperature spiking.

"Why?" asked Icy Hot, looking between the two of them all, clearly confused. "She was mourning the loss of her figure not three weeks

ago.”

She had been?”

Katsuki would...he would have known if she was feeling insecure about something so dumb, right?

And if she was, why the hell would that bastard know before him?

To which he silently- begrudgingly- answered to himself that if she did bring up to him that she didn't feel attractive, he would get so frustrated that all he could do was yell at her and tell her to stop being dumb.

Or tell her it didn't matter.

Except, like the hair, also something he didn't understand, it probably wasn't dumb to her- it probably *did* matter to her.

Which meant it mattered to him.

But, apparently, she had no problem talking to Icy Hot about it.

“Be that as it may,” said Deku. “Those are the kind of things that you don't just say to people, Shoto. Especially girls, telling them they look round could be misinterpreted in ways that...”

Suddenly, as if she had just caught up to the conversation at hand, Ochako burst into the most beautiful, happy giggle. She did that a lot around Icy-hot, he admitted.

It wasn't logical for him to be jealous, for-well- several reasons, but still, he was.

“Oh, Shoto,” she finally managed, wiping away a tear. “Was that your gentlemanly way of telling me that I'm getting my ass back?”

Death.

Katsuki would die here and now.

And from the way that Deku turned beet-red, he assumed the nerd wouldn't be far behind.

“Well,” said Icy-Hot, shrugging casually. “Yes.”

She looked delighted at the compliment, and he was officially jealous.

It wasn't like *he* hadn't noticed! Of course, he noticed. He wasn't blind. He was the one who worked out with her. Hell, she sat on his chest at least once a week when they were sparring.

"Thanks, Shoto," she said, squeezing his shoulder and walking past him toward the chair where Deku sat, meds and icepack in hand. "I needed that."

Katsuki huffed and gathered his shit. He had noticed too, probably before Icy-hot had, but he couldn't say shit like that. He couldn't get away with it in the way clueless could by rights of him being so utterly ignorant of every social norm.

Katsuki couldn't say shit like that without being slapped.

"Oh..." he looked at her. "You're leaving?" Her eyes went down to his bag, and he could see the disappointment in her eyes.

"Yeah," he said. "Too fucking loud down here."

"Okay," she said with a nod, as she pressed the icepack to Deku's wrist; she looked more than a little dejected.

"When you're done playing nurse, we'll finish your dumb essay," he grumbled, turning to leave but not in time to miss her smile. He continued toward the stairs- mulling over the whole interaction. It was all so confusing and unclear to him.

Her hair had been important.

Her body, apparently, had been a source of insecurity too. He knew she had hang-ups around feeling unsafe and disconnected from it; he knew she had wanted to make it stronger and faster, but he hadn't known that she was feeling insecure about the look of it.

Sure, lately, he had noticed that she had been putting more thought into it. She still wore the modified uniform, but lately, it had been a bit more tailored and tapered to her figure, and she had been styling her hair and wearing mascara and shit, but he thought it was just that she finally had the bandwidth to invest energy in that kind of thing now- now that every minute wasn't spend fighting tooth and nail to get her head above water.

Was it one of those things that had to do with being a girl? A woman? Something he didn't understand.

He tried to translate it into an experience that he could relate to. If his masculinity- his sense of himself as a man- was brutalized, how would he try and reconnect to it?

He wasn't sure.

But maybe, for Ochako, it was somehow tied to all of this; to her physicality, to reconnecting with those things that would have been weaponized and used to hurt her.

But he wasn't sure why she would talk to Icy-Hot about it and not him...

It wasn't that he wanted to be her only person. He knew it was good for her to have as many people in her corner as possible. He just didn't understand why she hadn't talked to him about it too. He could tell her nice things about her face, her hair, or...whatever. He just wasn't sweet or clueless, so his words would always be a little more weighted.

He was trying.

Trying to be a good friend, despite his inconvenient crush ("a crush," he called it as if that contained the expense of what they meant to one another), but he had to call it a crush...at least for now.

Until he knew exactly what it was.

###

That first night, Ochako tired and chickened out about two minutes in. She tried again a few nights later; her fingers light and experimental over her neck, her shoulders, her breasts, her stomach, but never dipping below her waist for more than a few seconds.

She tried again a week later, shy and tentative, finally able to touch the entirety of her body. But that was all she did, slow, tender touches. She didn't need to orgasm tonight, or any night; she was just trying to lose herself in the sensation of her own touch.

It was nice.

She exhaled and leaned into the feeling.

A few days later, she tried again, and her touches were longer, her



sensations more heightened, finding parts that her fingers had never really touched for more than a few seconds.

It was okay. There was no “goal”; she could just do this and see what happened, see what her body wanted. So far, it was satisfied with just these touches, growing in boldness and security.

Then for some reason, her thoughts went to her spar that morning with Katsuki. He had pinned her with his hips, one hand gripping both of hers above her head, his face hovering over hers; his sweaty hair falling into his face, his breathing labored, his eyes roaming over her face, intense and so deeply attentive- making certain that she was okay with the position.

She was.

She really, really was.

She got closer that night, breathes shallow, and whimpering with expectation.

But she didn't know how to give herself fully to the sensation. So she settled back into her pillow- feeling pretty good.

Confused, but good.

She didn't quite have words for what was changing- though, not really changing- feelings for Katsuki. At her basic level, she knew, of course, what attraction was- what it felt like. But attraction- she assumed- often preceded intimacy.

In this case, everything was out of order in a way that made her nervous- made the whole thing difficult to understand and sort out; it made the natural next-steps muddled. But, somewhere along the way, she had found herself wanting to lean in just a little bit more when they watched T.V. on his bed.

At one point, her hand lightly fell against his stomach, her fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt. Her touches tentative and careful, not a far cry from how she would normally touch him but something about it was also entirely different; something about it made her heart jump in her throat. Her eyes were locked on the laptop in front of them, hoping to hide the evidence of any blush. At first, she had wondered if the touch had been so unremarkable that he hadn't noticed at all. But then, the tips of his fingers started to trace shy, light circles against her back, and she had to actively remind herself to

breathe as she tried to still the beat of her heart that most certainly was not related to panic or fear but something else entirely.

The touches were light and stayed in one place, but she was certain that a lot had been said in those light grazes that they could both read.

And when he said goodnight to her, his voice a little lower and more gravely and bashful, she was sure something was changing that they were both aware of. Maybe he had been aware of it longer than her, for all she knew.

That night, alone in her bed, she had her first orgasm, and this time she could give herself over to the sensation. It didn't leave her feeling gross or panicked or sick; she felt good and relaxed and tired.

It was her.

All hers.

And no one else's.

###

Something had definitely changed.

He had thought at first that he imagined it, that maybe it was wishful thinking on his part. But it had been happening more and more lately. Her eyes would linger on him, and he would pretend not to notice; they would dart too often to his lips to just be coincidence every time. She blushed more around him than she ever had before.

He hadn't noticed at first because he had been too distracted about the fact that her cheeks were finally pink again.

But she was definitely blushing more, especially during workouts when he would lift his shirt to wipe away the sweat on his face (and so what if he started doing it more? It was for science- he needed a larger sample size to draw any conclusions.)

And then there were the shy testing touches. He didn't reciprocate right away, but it wasn't from lack of wanting to. He just...he didn't want to be wrong about this. He wanted to get this right.

But when she had just felt up his abs the last time they watched T.V. together, he was pretty sure he wasn't misreading that. So, he had

moved to respond with his own light touches on her back. She could easily roll away if she wanted or needed. He watched her face- all he found was a blush, no fear or anxiety or tenseness. Her shoulders were relaxed, and her breathing was even.

And then, just like that, they became a part of their time together. They sat a little closer than they needed while doing homework; their hands landed a bit more freely when they watched T.V. together (Katsuki had yet to be able to admit to himself that they were fucking cuddling, even though it was impossible to deny at this point). But in many ways, their lives remained unchanged, even as this unspoken thing between them became a little more obvious. So he assumed, for her at least, things hadn't become awkward or weird.

It just felt...natural.

Normal.

Or as normal as things could be for the two of them.

And then, one day, while they were both working in his room, she looked up at him from where she was sitting on his bed and said his name, shaky and uncertain.

“Katsuki...”

The tone was odd- one he hadn't heard from her in a while. So he turned at his desk to look over his shoulder at her. Her hands were shaking nervously as she shut her textbook and set it aside. He raised an eyebrow and waited for her to continue. She looked like she was having an internal battle, a back and forth war with herself about whether or not to say whatever it was that was on her mind.

“Yes?” he pressed.

“Uh...C-can I ask you something without you getting mad or freaking out?”

He scowled at her. “When do I get mad...?” she looked at her quizzically, and he rolled his eyes. “At you?” he amended. She smiled softly and seem to settle a bit at that assurance, but her eyes remained locked on his comfort, away from him.

She puffed out her cheeks and let out a puff of air. “Out with it,” he barked, still turned in his chair to look at her. He didn't mean it cruelly; he just knew that sometimes she needed a little nudge.

Her mouth formed a tight line of resolve, and her hands formed tight fists.

She was really fucking cute like that.

“Katsuki,” she almost yelled, no doubt trying to yell herself into confidence (it worked for him after all). “Do you want to kiss me?”

Katsuki’s brain shut down for about five seconds.

He felt like all of the air had been knocked out of his lungs.

*Stay calm.*

*Stay calm.*

*Stay calm.*

He blinked once- just to make sure he was still functioning. She was still on his bed, but she had abruptly covered her face after she had worked up the courage to ask her question.

Good, that gave him a moment to breathe.

To gather his thoughts.

To figure out how to respond in a way that didn’t make him look entirely like an idiot with a crush; in a way that made sense for her- that took her seriously as a human with wants and desires, but also recognized any pockets of trauma or unhealth that may be spurring this question.

It was a fine line between infantilizing and caring for her, but so far, he felt like he was doing an okay job.

“I’m sorry,” she squeaked suddenly, shaking her head, her face still buried in her hands. “I’m so sorry! That was stupid! You’ve been a good friend, and now I’m making things weird! I’m sorry! Please just...forget it!”

He sighed and stood up from the desk, crossing his room to the bed before her rambling got worse.

He sat on the edge of the bed, reached out for her wrist, and gently tugged a hand away. Her gaze was cast down.

“Oi,” he said, a gentle command in his voice. “Look at me, Uraraka, so

we can actually talk about this.”

She bit her lip and looked up slowly, brown eyes big with curiosity, anxiety, and a little bit of hope.

God, he was so fucked.

“Yeah,” she breathed, running a hand through her hair. “Yeah.”

She sat for a moment and looked at her, an awkward silence falling between them as he looked at her expectantly. “Oh,” she said and pointed at herself. “Me?!”

“Tch...Yeah,” he said. “You first.”

She nodded. “Okay...okay, right,” her gaze darted around the car before settling on the ceiling...Uh...I...I’m trying to...not...god, I’m sorry...”

“S’fine,” he said, indulgently- more than he usually would be, but that was always true of her. “Take your time.” He wanted it to be clear, whatever it was that she was asking. He opted not to tell her that he would be inclined to give her just about anything she wanted.

Because just because he wanted to doesn’t mean he should.

And he wanted to be 100% sure clear on what she wanted. He knew that was important with anything like this, but it was especially important now.

“Attraction,” she squeaked out. “Sexuality.” She was just saying words now. “Men.” Yup, just saying words, but he was following. “It’s all just so overwhelming for me, and I’ve been working with Dr. Shoko on that specifically.” That made sense, and it gave context to some of her weird behavior lately. “Trying to figure out how to get it all untangled from this giant shame spiral.” She exhaled, seeming to relax slightly, finding her voice when she saw he wasn’t totally losing his shit (at least externally). “I’ve...I was...before everything happened, I had no...” she groped for the right word. He resisted the urge to offer options to her because all of this needed to come from her.

“Experience. At all. With anything. I had never even kissed anyone. So, when I started feeling...” she puffed out her cheeks and blew out another puff of air. “...attraction to...” She screwed up her face a little like she was having her teeth pulled. “You.” It came out in a bit of squeak as she pointed at him, but all the same, something inside of him jumped at the confession. But he remained calm. “I felt a lot of

ugly things about...about myself...but Dr. Shoko said it was good. That it was good for me to feel those things if they were a part of me. Which...I think they are. I freaked out at first because I thought that part of me would be...messed up or something.”

He nodded, not interrupting, trying to pretend that he wasn't reeling from her confession that she was attracted to him. The only tell, he was sure, was the pinkening tip of his ears. "...so over the past month and a half, I've been working on that. And...I find I want to kiss you.” Her voice dropped off in a whisper. “A lot.”

He was about to say something, he wasn't sure what when she picked up again.

“And I don't even know what I'm asking,” she said, blushing a deep, sweet pink. “It's dumb, or maybe it isn't. I just- I don't want to stop being your friend, and I don't want you to feel like you're just some random guy who I sometimes want to kiss because...” she looked at him again, though it looked like it was very hard for her to do. “I don't want you to feel used or anything- especially when you mean so much to me. Part of it is that I think, I think I want to be someone who can kiss and be with someone one day. And I want to know if it's even possible for me anymore and you...” she looked away briefly and then back to his gaze. “And you're the only one that I think I want to try with. I know that I would trust you enough to say I wanted to stop or whatever. I just- I think I would be safe enough to enjoy it.” When she finished, she was shaking and breathless. “Now you go.”

You go?

Fuck he had a million questions and concerns, and none of them were as loud as his desire to yell out a very obnoxious and loud yes.

“So...” he said. “Like...friends with benefits?”

She let out a breathy laugh. “I mean, the benefit is just kissing and...” her voice trailed off into a frustrated growl.

“Use your words.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, but he could see calmness returning to her- like she knew now, no matter how this conversation went, that he wasn't going anywhere. “Friends with benefits,” she said. “I feel like there is an expectation that you not have anything other than friendly feelings, and, in the spirit of full disclosure, that isn't entirely the case for me.” His jaw clenched tightly, holding back any extremely dorky

smile that attempted to burst onto his face from that. "Like...I don't know what I can give, or even if I can be with someone...ever. But..." she looked at him with a soft smile. "I feel like if it turns out I can, if it turns out I'm not totally shattered beyond repair, maybe..."

Her head fell back, and she stuck out her tongue. "Blahhh," she said, shaking her head. "I'm sorry. This sounds crazy. I'm asking you to stay my friend, but also kiss me sometimes to see if I can and maybe one day date me...I know that's crazy to ask because y-you're you." What did that mean? "And you probably want to actually date someone for real one day, and asking you to wait for me to be ready when I may never be ready is so selfish of me."

She liked him.

It wasn't in his head.

He doesn't tell her that there was never going to be anyone else- that it wouldn't be fair to anyone else, because no one would ever mean what she meant to him.

"But Katsuki..." fuck, he needed to actually talk. She was already shrinking in on herself in self-doubt. "If...if this is too much or weird or whatever, please say so, and I swear I'll never ask again. The most important thing to me is our friendship. I don't want to lose that."

"My turn," he said quickly. "And first, I don't do anything I don't want to, so if I say yes or no, it's because it's what I want to. Second..." he looked at her in what he hopes was a semi-stern reprimand. "You can't scare me off. Because I'm me, and I don't fucking run from anything. And three," he paused, resisting with all his willpower the 'yes' behind his teeth. "...What does Dr. Shoko think?"

"She...she was supportive," she answered. "She said as long as I'm clear about boundaries, that it could be really healthy if everyone involved is onboard and communicating. She said it's good to have someone that I trust and that apparently, a lot of people kinda stumble accidentally onto their triggers with someone who doesn't understand. So working at least some of it out with someone who is safe is helpful."

He nodded, taking in her words.

It made sense.

"If you don't want any of that, then I totally understand," she added

hurriedly. "I know it's so much to ask- too much to ask, but I just wanted you to..."

"Are you gonna fucking let me answer?"

She bit her lip, closing her mouth and nodding. He shifted his leg beneath him so he could turn more fully to face her on the bed.

"How are you picturing this?"

She went onto her knees and shifted a little closer, tucking her hair behind her ear. "First, I wanna know if- it...I don't want it to be something just for me?"

Right.

He knew how he felt, but she didn't. She had shared her feelings for him- told him she wanted to kiss him, told him she was attracted to him, that she might one day want to date him. The only feelings still up in the air, the only ones not spoken out, were his.

And he had known his feelings for a little bit longer than her.

All he had to do was tell her that he liked her too.

He just didn't know how to do it. Even knowing how she felt about him, the thought of voicing his feelings made his head spin. He didn't know how to tell the girl that meant so much to him that he also had a crush on her. It all felt so...not enough.

He looked up; she was waiting, her nerves clearly mounting with every second of his silence. Fuck.

"Yeah..." he said, lame and awkward. "Yeah, I would be...I'd be down."

Fuck. So fucking lame.

But she looked almost surprised- relieved- a little delighted. Had she thought he'd say no?

"Really," she squeaked. "I...ugh...wow..."

"So how do you want to do this, Uraraka?" he asked. Not exactly the most romantic set-up, but this wasn't the case of two horny teens feeling each other up in the back seat of a car. Well, not that he wasn't a hormonal teen in some ways, but still, he knew this was more than



that.

“I uh...I’m not sure.”

“Tch... this is your idea, and you don’t have a plan,” he said with a smirk.

“I didn’t even think you’d say yes!”

God. Her self-esteem was still fucking shit.

Then he remembered how she had lit up at Todoroki’s comment.

“Why wouldn’t I?” he said, crossing his arms. “A hot girl wants to kiss me and just happens to be someone I don’t hate? Why wouldn’t I say yes?”

She blushed and covered her eyes again.

And he couldn’t bite back the smirk.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay...” her lips turned into a small smile like she didn’t want to give away how happy the comment made her. “Well, thank you.”

She was such a dork.

“But you gotta tell me what you’re thinking,” he continued. “You’re in the driver’s seat here, Uraraka.”

“Okay, well...” she was nervous, clearly- but this was important to him. It was important that she get comfortable telling him what she wanted if they were going to do this. “Can I just sort of let you know when I might want to try?”

“Sure,” he said. “Tongue?” She let out a choked sound, and he shrugged. “Sorry,” he said, leaning back on his arms. “Those are the things I need to be clear before we do anything.”

“You’re right,” she said, punctuating her words with a nervous giggle. “I just...I hadn’t thought about it...uh...can I just...I think not at first if that’s okay?”

He bit back the sigh of frustration at her implication that it might not be okay- to the tentative uncertainty of her question.

“Hey,” he grumbled sourly. “I told you. You’re in the driver’s seat.”

“I know,” she said. “I just...I don’t want it to be...I want you to enjoy it too.”

He sighed; he understood what she was getting at. “But the point is that you don’t have to do anything just because you think I’ll enjoy it. I’ll tell you if I don’t like anything. But if you ever feel like you’re doing something just because you think I want it, that kinda violates the whole point, right? ”

She nodded. “You’re right, I’m sorry.”

Before he could scold her for the apology, she scooted closer to him, and Katsuki tensed slightly.

“Umm...now?” he asked. His heart was pounding like crazy. He wondered if she could hear it.

She shrugged. “Oh...if...If you want?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. He hoped his nerves weren’t too apparently. “Yeah.”

At his say-so, she moved closer, still on her knees, and he turned to face her, one leg off the bed the other bent creating a barrier as she scooted closer, so she wasn’t directly between his legs. The position gave her a slight height advantage, so he had to tip his head back slightly to look at her.

“Okay, uh...” she breathed out, and he could feel it on his forehead. “Have you...have you kissed anyone before?”

He searched her eyes for any sign of why she was asking. He’d be honest either way but couldn’t quite tell from her tone what she wanted to hear. It sounded like she was curious more than anything else.

“Yes,” he said.

She nodded. “Good,” she said with a nod. “I...I didn’t want your first kiss to be so lame as this.” He snorted and rolled his eyes. “I just mean I may not be very good at it.”

He wanted to tell her that there was no fucking way kissing her wouldn’t be good. That it may as well be his first kiss for how much the others had meant to him compared to her.

It was the first kiss that made his mouth dry, and his heartbeat faster than it ever had with an overwhelming mix of nerves and excitement. It was the first kiss where he was cataloging the face in front of him—watching the way her tongue darted out briefly over her own lips, the way her eyes darted down between his eyes and his lips like she couldn't decide which one to look at.

“Ummm...” she raised her hand tentatively, hovering it next to his face. “Can I...”

He nodded. His chest ached with anticipation. Her fingertips landed softly, delicately, at his jaw, her pinky and ring finger threading through his hair at his neck, her middle and pointer curling around his ear, and her thumb grazing his jaw.

This was the first kiss where he was frantically trying to notice everything, so he could remember it when it was over.

“Where do you want my hands?” he asked, his voice low and gravelly.

“Uh...my waist?” He raised an eyebrow at the question.

“Why are you asking, Cheeks?”

She rested her other hand on his shoulder and scooted closer.

“On my waist,” she said with more certainty. He swallowed past the dryness in his throat, wiping his hands on his pants before he raised both, securing them on her waist, opting a little higher than natural to stay safe.

“Okay...uh...here I go,” she said with a nervous giggle, and he had no idea how she could be so cute and dorky.

And yes, somehow, despite the odd arrangement, her hand was resting impossibly soft and tender against his jaw, and her eyes were filled with an overwhelming affection.

He wondered if she knew you were supposed to close your eyes, but she didn't. She held his gaze until the last moment.

She touched her lips to his and paused for a moment. He didn't move but waited as she weighed whether or not she wanted to continue. Then her thumb moved lightly against his jaw, and she leaned forward into him.

It was soft, shy, and pliant- her mouth parting just a little against his.

It was stupidly sweet and very quick, but when she pulled away, she didn't go far, just enough for him to see her small blush and bashful smile. Her hands didn't move, but her fingers curled slightly against his skin.

"Thank you, Katsuki," she whispered.

He wanted to rebuff her thanks, to tell her that he was grateful, to let her know that he understood just what she was trusting him with, what this meant for her. He wanted to tell her, continually, daily, how lucky he felt that she had never in her life been afraid of him. That he understood what it meant for her to trust him with a kiss, to trust him to put his hands on her, and hold her the way he did.

"Was it...okay?"

He let go of her waist and gripped her forearm before moving his hand up to hold her wrist. "Best fucking kiss yet," he said, smirking at her.

She giggled, and, god, it *sounded* like her. "Can...can we go again?"

His smirk grew more flagrant and toothy as his hands went back to her waist. He cocked his head to the side. "Is this supposed to be the part in the rom-com where I tell you aren't allowed to love me, Cheeks?"

She laughed louder this time, and she gripped his shoulder tighter. "Whatever," she said with a roll of her eyes. "I already love you, dummy. That's the point!"

She didn't give him a chance to process and sit with that particular revelation before his lips were on hers again.

He knew what she meant; at least he thought he did.

And somehow, it made it so much better.

So much bigger.

And before he could stop himself- he smiled against her lips, her declaration making his whole body feel a little fuzzy and light. He tried desperately to take the dorky smile back before she noticed, but it was too late because she was mimicking the movement.

And he couldn't bring himself to feel self-conscious about it when it made her smile too.

Yup. Kissing Ochako was good. Really fucking good.

###

It turned out that Ochako really liked kissing.

Or she really liked kissing Katsuki.

But what she really liked was how normal everything else was for now. They still sparred, still cooked together, still watched dumb T.V. on stressful days. In many ways, their lives remained the same, and that took so much pressure off of her.

He didn't pout on days where it just wasn't in her to come to his room for a quick kiss (or a not so quick one). He didn't expect it or comment on it if all they did was cuddle. She liked that he let her take the lead on that.

One day, she hoped, she would be able to experience a more initiative side of Katsuki, the kind of Katsuki she saw in other areas of their life, but right now, she wouldn't expect that of him. Everything was still too tender and new and nerve-wracking for her and for him.

It was safer to keep it this way, at least for now.

She liked how he let her explore with slow, tentative kisses. She liked how he smelled and tasted and how his hair felt between her fingers.

They had, at her insistence more than his, decided to keep their arrangement to themselves. Ochako just felt like it wasn't anyone's business right now. Everything about her was out in the open in black and white for the world to see and speculate on, so it was nice to have this completely be for herself. Plus, it kept some of their well-meaning but perhaps overly-protective classmates off of Katsuki's ass.

"Am I allowed to flirt with you in public?" he asked, only half-teasing.

"Maybe a little," she told him with a smile.

Frankly, the idea of Katsuki flirting with her in any capacity was thrilling, and the day he asked her that, her kisses had been a bit more lingering, less tentative, and more earnest. Along with that, their

communication came easier- less stilted and awkward and unsure.

She told him she liked it when he held her face, and he told her he liked it when she ran her fingers through his hair.

All-in-all, it was never particularly heated or intense or anything most teens hadn't already done by 17, but for her, for them, everything meant more- everything was weighted with unspoken meaning and devotion; all of which left her breathless, no matter how brief or chaste the kiss was.

The first time her tongue darted out in a kiss, it coaxed a sound from his that thrilled and delighted her.

The first time his tongue traced her bottom lip after she had assured him that yes, it was exactly what she wanted, it was intoxicating.

And with every new touch, kiss, or graze, the asking became as much a part of their time together as anything else. She checked in regularly, and so did she. And while she could see how someone on the outside may perceive it as "less romantic" or "mood-spoiling" (after all, how often was this portrayed in books and movies and T.V. shows), but for her, it was just the opposite.

The more direction that was offered, the more she was able to let herself sink into it and enjoy it without panicking or stressing, or freaking out.

...Well, usually.

But Katsuki was practiced in reading her and could often tell the physical signs that she was starting to panic before any objection or discomfort actually reached her brain and came out of her mouth- the quickening of her pulse, the tightening of her grip, a sharp inhale, and he would pause or redirect or check-in- his lightning-fast reflexes and self-control, ever trustworthy.

Which meant she could enjoy herself.

She could enjoy him.

And he seemed- she thought- to enjoy her too.

###

"This is so fucking stupid..."

Usually, that would be Ochako's cue to scold the grumpy blonde beside her, but now she was more inclined to agree as she waited nervously with her classmates in the common area, though many of them were chattering excitedly, bounding off the walls.

Interviews were good.

Exposure was good.

And class 2-A at UA had a lot of exposure, much of it death-defying and causing more than a few critical eyes to be cast on the school.

But Ochako felt as though she had enough exposure to last a lifetime. She knew she'd have to get over that, though, if she wanted to be a hero, but all the same, this past year had done little to ingratiate the press to her.

Tokota Entertainment was known for its celebrity interviews, day-time talk shows, award shows, and fluff pieces. That wasn't exactly UA's usual fare, but perhaps that was the point. Maybe they wanted something fun and fluffy.

"Are you all right?"

She looked up at Deku, who was standing casually beside her. He had been with her during her last disastrous encounter with the press and was no doubt thinking of that now, as his expression was not so far off from Katsuki's.

"Yeah," she said. "Aizawa told me they had been informed that certain questions were off-limits, so..." Katsuki snorted beside her in cynical derision. He wasn't wrong to not put much stock into that, but she needed something to cope with because the dorm would soon be flooded with cameras and strangers. "But either way," she said, brightly. "My goal is not to talk at all during the interview. "And I shouldn't have too! They'll want to talk to you guys and Shoto; that's usually how these things go!"

Usually.

There was once a time when she might have felt a tug of something at that admittance- not really jealousy or resentment, but rather confusion. She knew Deku and Katsuki were in a league of their own when it came to strength and firepower, with Shoto close behind them with the added "benefit" (if it could be called that) of being a household name himself as a Todoroki. But still, her class was filled

with powerful people, and she couldn't help but notice who got the most attention.

But now, she was relying on that fact- it was the only thing keeping her rooted in her body.

She didn't want to speak the whole time.

She wanted to sit, listen, and get done as soon as possible.

"Oh my god," squealed Mina from the window, jumping up and down. "They brought Toko Paka!"

"Who?" asked Kiri, earning a slap to his head from his girlfriend.

"Who?!" she repeated, in utter disbelief. Ochako didn't say anything because she certainly had no idea who that was, but Mina and Toru were losing their minds over it. "He's one of the best designers in Tokyo! His quirk is a designer's dream."

Katsuki rolled his eyes, and Ochako looked up at him, surprised that he would have an opinion one way or the other. "My old man says his quirk is a travesty to the field of fashion design."

Ochako laughed and craned her neck as she looked out toward the caravan of people approaching the dorms, all holding cameras, trunks, partitions, and bags of who knows what.

She felt her nerves flair up, an almost Pavlovian response any time she saw a camera these days. Going from zero-exposure to overexposure in the worst possible way had given her whiplash, it seemed.

The door opened, and a bustle of noise and excitement joined them, though Aizawa already looked annoyed, clearly not the one who made this decision. A petite woman in a tight bun was flitting around the dorm, calling out orders and directing stagehands, already rearranging the space.

Ochako sniffed. "Our dorms aren't good enough for their show?"

"Probably not," said Shoto, missing the menace in her words and going straight for the literal translation of her question. "Typically, they have their own studio and audience, but I imagine it was a condition set by our teachers that they conduct the interview here."

Soon long partition was erected across the common room, and the



girls were ushered to one side. Ochako watched, slightly overwhelmed as makeup artists and mirrors and clothes were pulled out.

“All right, ladies,” said the petite woman. “We had already sent all of your pictures and hero costume designs to Toko, so your dresses are already prepared and ready to go! You’ll just need to try them on so he can make any adjustments here.”

Mina and Toru were jumping up and down in excitement that they were getting their own specially designed dress. And she had to admit, they were beautiful, truly something to behold. Mina looked about ready to cry as the beautiful dress was handed to her.

Momo looked slightly less enthused with the way her dress fit (or didn’t fit) her chest. Ochako knew she had to dress a certain way to make use of her quirk but was that necessary here? Momo was gorgeous, and she deserved to dress; however, she wanted, but she sighed almost sadly at the way the dress fit her.

She was just a teenager, after all.

“Uraraka...” the stylist called. She walked over to Toko Paka. He held up the dress with long, thin limbs and then clicked his spider-like fangs together and cocked his head to the side. “You look different than in your pictures,” he observed. “I may have to make adjustments.”

Ochako looked down at the dress draped over her arm. It was beautiful- no doubt, with her hero colors incorporated masterfully into the delicate material. But it was tight and short with one strap. She wished she had known this was going to be a part of the interview.

For a moment, she considered giving in to her polite side- the side that said to grin and bear it and walk away with the dress. It wouldn’t be more than an hour. She could handle being in a dress for an hour- right?

Except.

She didn’t want to.

She wasn’t ready.

“I’m sorry,” she said, holding the dress back out to him. “I...I don’t wear dresses.” He raised an eyebrow and looked at her as if she had grown a second head that he wanted to snap off with his fangs.

"I'm sorry..." he said as if he hadn't quite heard her right.

"I...I'm not comfortable in dresses," she said. "I would have told someone that if they had asked me, but I wasn't aware that..."

"I don't negotiate with toddlers," he snipped, clearly trying to communicate that he was done with this conversation.

She stepped forward, surprising herself. She wasn't shrinking away. "What does that mean?"

"You heard me," he said. "I have a vision, and I assure you my vision will flatter even young ladies with the figure of a toddler. So be grateful and..."

"I'm sorry," she snapped. "I'm sorry you poured time and effort into this dress that I will not be wearing, but my job is to be a hero, not have a body that makes it easy for you to dress or not dress."

"Preach," she heard Jirou mutter from behind her; Momo was standing nearby as well, looking a little sheepish.

"Uh...I actually wouldn't mind a fashionable neck drape or some coverage for my chest as well."

Paka looked downright furious. "You," he said, pointing at Ochako. "Take your dress and move along; I have work to..."

"I told you," she said, shoving it back at him, her own patience wearing thin. "I'm not going to wear..."

"And I'm telling you," he shouted back, "That no one likes their women heroes to be difficult and demanding, and if you get a reputation for that now, then..."

"Oh, what's the problem?" The peppy produced who seemed to be running the show broke through their altercation, coming up beside them.

"No problem," said Paka through gritted teeth, shoving the dress once again back at Ochako, but this time she let it fall to the ground. She had tried to do this respectfully, she truly had, but she was done with this asshole.

"Yeah," she said, looking at the produce. "I'm not wearing this."

"This...is...an...outrage..." roared Paka.

“Nooo,” said Ochako, toeing at the fabric pooled on the floor. “This... is...a...dress. I promise you, the civilized world will survive.”

“Yeah,” said Mina, coming up beside Ochako, looking an absolute vision in her dress. “Calm down, dude. Just make her something like that suit you made for Joy Takagi at the music awards last year.” She patted Ochako’s shoulder. “She’d look amazing in that!”

In a different situation, Ochako could have kissed Mina for that, but Paka looked positively affronted.

“Now now,” said the producer in a deescalating voice. “Uraraka, Paka worked hard on these designs, so couldn’t you consider...”

“I really couldn’t,” she said, trying to sound apologetic again; after all, this wasn’t the producer’s fault. “And I did apologize. I know the work he must have put into...”

“It takes him like 2 minutes to make a dress,” said Mina to her, but then she looked Paka. “But I’m a big, big fan, sir!”

“But,” continued Ochako. “I...I’m really not comfortable with wearing dresses.”

“Then you won’t last as a hero,” cut in Paka.

“Thanks for your expert opinion on the matter,” said Ochako dismissively, returning her gaze back to the woman who she hoped was a bit more reasonable.

“I’m more of an expert than you would think,” said Paka. “It’s all about image!”

The producer looked positively overwhelmed, and Ochako couldn’t help but feel a little guilty. She hadn’t meant to put her in a hard place. She was doing her job, but still, Ochako didn’t want to give on this yet. One day she would likely have too, but she wasn’t ready yet.

“Uraraka,” she said carefully, looking between the two. “Your school invited us and assured us that we would have your full cooperation.”

“Then get Aizawa-sensei,” she said confidently.

The woman’s eye twitched, but all the same, she pressed a button on her head-set and whispered a few commands. A minute later, Aizawa was walking over to them, surrounded by dresses and glittery things

and looking like he regretted every decision he had ever made in his life.

“What’s the problem?” he asked, looking from the group of girls gathered around Ochako to the producer.

“Your student has objections to the specially designed dress we have made for her. Perhaps could impress upon her the importance of being flexible with media- especially for a hero.”

It was almost laughable to say that to Aizawa of all heroes. He looked down at Ochako, signaling it was her turn to talk. She held up the dress for him.

“I...I don’t want to wear a dress,” she said. “I know it’s annoying and bothersome, and I didn’t know that they were being made, and if someone had asked me ahead of time, I would have told them that I don’t want one.”

“And it’s not just Ochako,” said Momo, blushing deeply. “I wouldn’t mind having a wrap of some kind.”

Aizawa stood in silence for a moment, no doubt rethinking his entire career as he was being forced to navigate the clothing choices (or lack of choices) for his students. Then he looked at the producer.

“Well,” he said. “They don’t have to wear something that they aren’t comfortable with.”

Paka sputtered angrily. “I have never...”

Aizawa’s gaze snapped to his, a warning flaring there in his tired eyes. “Never what? Worked with high school students?”

Paka glared at Aizawa but didn’t argue. “I agreed to the interview,” said Aizawa. “Not to subjecting my students to feeling uncomfortable in their own home. So...” he narrowed his eyes, leaving no room for argument. “Either adjust accordingly, or this interview isn’t happening.”

Ochako felt a twinge of guilt. She hadn’t wanted to blow it for her classmates. This was her issue, and she wasn’t trying to make their lives harder. But the thought of wearing a dress, for the first time since getting back, on camera for millions to see...well, it made her feel sick.

“Okay...Okay...” said the producer, rubbing at her forehead. “Let’s just...” she looked at Paka. “We will pay you extra, of course, but would you be able to make the necessary changes?”

His nostril’s flared, and he looked like he was about to argue, but when his eyes fell again on Aizawa, he seemed to think better of it.

“Fine,” he sniffed and turned from them to start working. Ochako saw his long limbs spread out like a spider, and then his fingers moved like he was plucking at invisible strings, except they weren’t invisible; they were just small and thin and delicate, being weaved in mid-air.

Mina wasn’t kidding.

Still, she had felt bad he put effort into the design for her dress until he started acting like an asshole.

She turned to Aizawa. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I really didn’t mean to cause any problems.”

“No apology necessary,” he said. “Heroes should be able to advocate for themselves, and it’s certainly my job to advocate for my students.”

She nodded, swallowing back her emotion before it spilled out.

“Thank you.”

And for all that grouching, Paka looked no less proud of the tailored suit he produced, her colors no less expertly intertwined into the edges of the lapels and the dress shirt.

“It’s really lovely,” she said, who snorted annoyedly in return. “Thank you.”

He spared a look before shooing her off.

She wasn’t lying or kissing his ass. It was actually really amazing- the pants were feminine without feeling like a second skin, and they looked good with the strappy heels that also had pops of her hero colors reflected in them. And the tapered jacket fits like a dream.

The tie was a mystery, but Jirou explained that it was a cross-over tie and helped her situate it correctly.

Ochako was also relieved to see that Momo’s dress was now complete with a wrap that covered up a lot of her exposed skin. And she was also happy to see that Toru, Mina, Tsu, and even Jirou were

completely happy with their outfits- and they should be; they all looked amazing!

The makeup was slightly hellish at first, but she didn't have it in her to kick up a second fuss of the day. So she closed her eyes and grounded herself in her body, in her feelings, reminding herself over and over again where she was. And it helped that Mina and Tsu were on either side of her chatting away.

She didn't bother looking at her hair and makeup when they were done. She just moved to where the producers and stagehands were directing them. Ochako was proud of herself, proud that she had so adequately been able to blink away her tears, but still, the lip paint and the powder and the mascara were thick on her skin.

Reminding her that, once again, she couldn't even recognize herself.

"Okay," said the producers, gathering them as a group together. "Here's how this is gonna go, Tokota- san will announce you on his end. The girls will come out first and take the front row of seats, followed by the boys."

Ochako's body was reeling and yelling at her to run, misinterpreting the nerves and the sweating and the suffocating makeup that used to signal danger- readying her to fight to the death. She jumped when she felt something graze against the outside of her hand and looked up. Katsuki was standing beside her, his eyes were fixed forward.

But like it always did, his touch anchored her just a little as his pinkie moved against her hand, and it allowed her to focus back in on her sensations- not on the heavy feeling of her lashes, not on the panic that she was about to enter into bloody combat.

She was here.

She was at UA.

Katsuki and her peers and her teacher were standing right beside her.

She was safe.

She focused on the feel of his callouses against her palm.

She was safe.

She offered him a smile, but he didn't look like he bought it. "You

clean up good,” she said, giving him an exaggerated once over. She wasn’t lying, of course. His look, in fact, all of the guys’ looks, were decidedly less formal. But his pants actually fit, and they fit very well. His white button-up was tight across the wide expanse of his torso, and his jacket was a grenade green and similarly flattered his shoulders.

She really wished she could ask for a kiss.

“Whatever,” he muttered. “I look ridiculous...”

“Tch...” she snorted, mocking him. “Ridiculously hot, maybe.”

Katsuki still was looking forward, but she could see the blush shoot up his neck before she was pulled into the line with the other girls. She threw a cheeky grin over her shoulder at him, which he met with his own glare, but the blush had reached his ears, and he looked like he was trying not to smile.

See...she could flirt too!

And it had worked. She had needed a pleasant distraction to get her out of her head. She followed her classmates to the other side of the curtain to their entirely revamped common room.

“And now join me in welcoming the pros of tomorrow, class 2-A!”

The silence made it awkward as they walked out from behind the curtain, but Ochako assumed that with the green screen in front and behind them that this would be heavily edited.

“Don’t you all look so beautiful,” greeted Tokota, the infamous host. “Beautiful and alive, which is always good to see!” She saw Momo and Jirou exchange looks at the tasteless joke. “Oh, no! Here come the men! And here I was hoping it would just be the ladies and me today.”

Insert laugh track.

Were they supposed to laugh?

She heard the guys shift and move on the seats behind them, set up on raised platforms so that everyone could be seen by the cameras.

“So wonderful you could all be here!”

Ochako bit back a snicker.

Here, as in, at their own dorms?

“And we are so excited to get the inside scoop with one of the most... hmmm... colorful classes to come out of UA in a long time. Ever since your first year, you lot haven’t seemed to be able to stay out of the public eye. From villain attacks to kidnappings to fighting in an actual war, you’ve all been busy, and we want to know what’s next for all of you!”

Despite his reputation for being a gossip peddler- Uraraka found herself surprised with some of the thoughtful questions being asked of her peers. He spoke to Shoto about the weight of legacy without bringing up the unfortunate revelation of his brother. He asked Iida about the inspiration of his brother and how that motivated him to take on that mantle in his place. Of course, Deku was a favorite and had more than established himself as the unofficial successor of All-Might’s legacy, and Tokota asked him about how that expectation impacted his journey as a hero.

Even Sero was asked about his mixed-race heritage and the influence of his Japanese and Latino upbringing.

She was beginning to settle comfortably into the interview- content with just listening to her peers talk about their journeys. There was something soft and comforting in it all, until the interviewer addressed Katsuki.

“Katsuki Bakugo, you were number one at the entrance exams into UA, and you won first place in both Sports Festivals, and you continue to be a young hero with several eyes on you.” She could hear Katsuki huff in response. “But that being said, your violent tendencies did draw the attention of the League of Villains last year, right?”

Ochako closed her eyes and breathed out, slowly, folding her hands into a white-knuckled fist at the interviewer's tone.

“Why you asking if you already fucking know the answer?” asked Katsuki.

Tokota waited a beat and looked at someone else in the room. “We can edit that out,” called a producer. “Keep going.”

“Tell me, Bakugo,” continued Tokota. “Do you think your reputation as the bad boy of UA will impact your future as a hero?”

Ochako let out an involuntary bark of laughter. And she could feel



Katsuki glaring at her like he was afraid that she was going to reveal that he has a strict 9:30 bedtime and that he sneaks into his friends' room to clean it while they are gone because he can't abide the thought of any creepy crawlies making their way to their floor because Kiri left week-old pizza under his bed.

Tokota looked at her for the first time, and there was something akin to excitement in his eyes, like her talking first had somehow given him permission to talk to her.

"Uravity," he declared excitedly as if she hadn't been there this whole time, as if he hadn't been directing all of his questions to the guys in their class since they started this interview. Not that she wanted to talk, but still... the girls sitting next to her were amazing, and they deserved the chance to shine. "UA's mochi-loving sweetheart!" She did her best to hide her distaste at the way his voice changed when he talked to her; taking on a less weighty tone and shifting to something more cloying. "You fought Dynamight your first year, right?"

She nodded.

"And that particular match was met with a fair amount of scrutiny during and after," he continued.

She shrugged. She actually didn't know. Maybe that was true?

"It seemed most of his opponents were more evenly matched, but you were the outlier whose natural capabilities seemed to be the least equivalent with his."

"Natural?"

"Yes," he said. "Someone as naturally overpowered as Dynamight, it could be argued, has an unfair advantage over someone whose quirk is significantly less offensive..."

"Less?!" she heard Katsuki shout, and then the muttering of Kirishima no doubt pulling him back into a seated position. "She was the one who dropped half the stadium on our heads."

She almost laughed at the way he said it- something between pride and defensiveness. But Ochako, apparently having let go of her dream of not talking at all during this interview, had more to say. She knew full well he was insulting her as well, but for some reason, that's not the one that pricks her the hardest.

“You keep saying natural,” she said, shaking her head and leaning forward. “Like he’s just coasting on his explosions. That’s a gross misinterpretation of Ka- Bakugo’s quirk. He busts his ass for his power- just like everyone else here.”

“Well,” said Tokota, looking at her carefully. “You certainly have a lot to say about Dynamight.”

“That’s how our class is,” said Deku, intercepting any other leading questions on that front. “We all have each other’s backs.”

“And here I was thinking that you and Dynamight have a very tumultuous relationship.”

“He also saved my life,” said Deku, a bite in his voice that isn’t so much new for Ochako to hear but maybe jarring for the interviewer. “We are all competitive with each other, but that doesn’t change that we would all die for each other if we needed to.”

“Truly inspiring,” said Tokota, but he couldn’t entirely hide the sarcasm there. He wants drama, clearly.

“Now,” he said, looking at the row of girls. “I haven’t meant to neglect you beautiful ladies. Uravity, we heard a bit from you, but also, might I just say that suit looks amazing on you.” She smiled tightly in return. “Clearly, you have been training hard and have been dieting.” Ochako could see Jirou twitch beside her and the nervous wringing of Momo’s hand.

Sure, sure. It made sense that when the questions got to them, it would be about their possible dating life, their clothes, and their weight.

“I’m sure there are millions of women out there who would love to know your secret if you wouldn’t mind sharing?”

She let out a breathy bitter laugh before turning a bright, wide smile on Tokota. She could hear the beginning of Katsuki’s angry growl and the squeak of his seat as he moved to stand, but she had this one under control.

“Great question, Tokota,” she said, her voice overly sweet and exaggerated.

“Jesus Christ...” she heard Aizawa mutter off to the side. But it was too late; she was committed.

“Trauma mostly,” she answered blithely, and the man visibly blanched. “You know nothing will help you lose weight like abduction and starvation.”

Tokota didn’t blink for a good 15 seconds, groping for the right response. “I-I’m sorry, I...”

“0 out of 10, ladies,” she said, looking at the camera. “Would not recommend! Also, you’re beautiful and perfect already.”

Mina shot her a gorgeous smile and a wink, but Tokota, for his part, looked flushed and eager to move on. Good. That had been her hope.

“Well,” he said. “You ladies are a handful, that’s for sure. I...I did read somewhere that between 2-A and 2-B, this year has the most girls we’ve in the hero course. 12 out of 40.”

“Seriously,” whispered Sero behind them. “That’s the most?”

Ochako considered for a second if perhaps this would lead to an actual thoughtful question about gender inequality in hero work, but...that was asking for too much. Instead, Tokota looked conspiratorially at the row of boys behind them.

“Must be rough, hey fellas? Being around so many women at once?”

“No,” said Shoto, always being trusted to miss the double meaning of words to cut straight through the bullshit. “Why would it be?”

He asked, genuinely curious, leaving Tokota squirming and looking thoroughly called-out, even if it was inadvertent on Shoto’s part.

“Oh just...you know...I...” Ochako watched as he struggled to explain the joke. “I was just teasing,” he finally said.

And just like that, the conversation returned back to hero work, mainly directed at the guys with a few questions here and there for some of the girls. But Ochako spent the rest of the interview in silence- clearly, Tokota was as done with her as she was with him.

Fine by her.

###

“What the fuck happened to keeping your mouth shut in that

interview?"

Ochako dipped back, just out of reach of the heel aimed at her jaw, and then bounced forward, grasping it, pinky up and twisting it violently, almost knocking Katsuki off of his feet. She had, it seemed, a lot of anger stored up in her from the interview.

"He pissed me off," she said, throwing a punch.

Katsuki grinned at her widely. "Hey," he barked, sidestepping, and grabbing her arm. "I'm not him!"

"He shoulda kept his mouth shut!"

She twisted out of his hold, hooked her legs with his, and heaved forward, taking him with her, rolling him face-first into the dirt.

"No arguments here..." He tried to roll free, but she pinned his hands above his head and her forearm to his throat. "But I don't need you to fight my battles for me, Cheeks."

He bucked, trying to unseat her, but she clamped her legs down hard around him.

"Like hell I don't," she growled through gritted teeth. "It was a lose-lose for you, and he knew it. But when sweet..." he finally wiggled his leg free and hooked it around her torso and rocked forward, reversing their position.

God, he was stupid flexible for a guy.

"You were saying?" he asked. She struggled to free herself of his hands.

"I was saying," she heaved through gritted teeth. "That when sweet little Uravity, UA's mochi-loving sweetheart," she bit that part out with disdain, mimicking Tokota's voice, "speaks up for her favorite hero than those assholes don't get their footage of you screaming your head off, which is what they wanted."

"Yeah, because you went so easy on him..."

She rolled and angled her body so that her shoulder could slam against his throat, making him rear back enough for her to throw her body up against his. She clung to him tight and barrel-rolled them both again, once again putting him under, this time face-first in the

ground.

She was getting all worked up again.

“Uggh, he asked me about my diet,” she exclaimed, twisting his wrist. “My diet!” She twisted again.

“Oi!”

“Sorry,” she said, releasing her hold and then rolling off of him into a sitting position. “He just...he pissed me off.” She rolled her shoulder, experimentally.

“I know,” he said, sitting up beside her on the mat.

“My diet!?” she repeated incredulously.

“I was there, I heard,” he said, scooting closer so he was sitting behind her. “And you handled it like a badass.” He reached out and grabbed her shoulder with one hand and pressed his other hand against her spine, pushing and pulling on her shoulder.

She dropped her hand away from her shoulder and let Katsuki work his magic.

“Just put aside the inappropriate nature of the question,” she continued, letting her head drop forward. “The principle of it all is fucked too!” He chuckled behind her, no doubt at her language. “What? Like this is a body type to aspire to? One that comes from depressions and starvation? Like girls should want to look like some gross, malnourished POW?”

“Hey,” he said, his voice dropping to a soft scold, suddenly very close to her ear. Despite being closer to the softer side of Katsuki than most people, his tone still struck her and caused her to pause and look over her shoulder at him. “I get it, you miss your ass and everything, and I’m not trying to tell you how to feel about yourself, but aren’t you supposed to not be calling yourself things like “gross” right now?”

She sighed and let her head fall back onto Katsuki’s shoulder so she was peering up at him.

“I know,” she sighed. “I just...it seems really fucked up that the assumption is that every woman and girl must want to change their bodies. Like it’s a given?!”

He didn't respond, but his touches softened into light caresses, causing goosebumps to rise on her skin. She looked up at him, at the sharp cut of his jaw, the perpetual dip of his brows into a scowl, the way his hair fell over his sweat-drenched forehead.

"Katsuki," she said again, softer this time, drawing his gaze down to her face. She raised her hand up to reach over her shoulder, her fingers itching to touch his face. He was so close.

And he was too damn pretty.

She inhaled sharply, her eyes darting down to his lips in time to see it twitch into a smirk.

"Gotta ask with more than your eyes there, Cheeks." His tone was teasing, but there was gravel to his voice that made him shiver. She batted them theatrically at him.

"Could you kiss me, Katsuki?"

She expected him to smirk in victory, to tease her about how obvious she was, but his red eyes locked on hers with complete and utter focus. And she thinks- maybe- affection.

She wondered if her heart would ever stop speeding up when he was about to kiss her. It couldn't possibly, always, be this exciting, could it?

He pressed his lips softly to her- always soft- at first until she indicated whether or not she wanted a little bit more. She let herself fall back into him slightly, giving herself more room to deepen the kiss, and her fingers curled into his hair just a little. His hand tightened around the wrist of the hand she had pressed to his face, and there was something just slightly different to this kiss.

Maybe it was the position, her back pressed to his chest and feeling the breadth of him, a brick wall behind as she arched back to find his lips. Maybe it was the post-spar adrenaline. The post-interview tension. Or maybe it was the way he was holding her, and she was holding him. Maybe it was the way the hand at her shoulder was moving down her arm until it found her hand and closed around it, lacing his fingers through hers.

She opened her mouth to him just a little, taking in the taste of him a little bit more, as much as she was able. She sighed happily into his mouth as his thumb grazed the outside of her hand.

It was shockingly intimate.

Tender.

And soft.

She pulled away just a little bit and took a shaky breath.

“Are you good,” he asked, the words close enough for her to feel them against her lips. She tightened her fingers around his when she felt him loosen his hold just a little, and she moved the tips of her fingers over his cheekbone.

She didn’t answer for a moment, too distracted by his eyes, by his half-lidded eyes and the flush in his cheeks, by the steady rise and fall of his chest.

She was too distracted by the warm, certain feeling spreading in her chest.

His brow furrowed, and he pulled away from her just a little. “Ochako,” he said. “You gotta talk to me if...”

Her eyes shot up to his eyes.

“I’m good,” she assured. “I’m...” she breathed out slowly and smiled at him. “I just...I just wanted to look at you,” she confessed, and an inscrutable expression flittered across his face, and she wondered for a moment if that was too much.

Too honest?

But when his forehead dropped against hers, and his hand squeezed hers- she thought, maybe, it was okay. Perhaps he wanted her to say stuff like that to him?

He pressed a light kiss to the tip of her nose.

And she wondered again at how he had somehow become someone who meant so much to her.

She wondered if he knew how much she felt for him, how much she loved him.

How real all of this was for her.

She wanted to say as much and perhaps would have had the sound of

a surprised gasp not made them both break away from each other and look toward the door of the gym that had been empty a few minutes ago.

They looked up and found themselves looking at the smarmy, smirky face of Monoma.

To his credit, Katsuki's instinct was not to blast himself at Monoma (at least not immediately), he did try to turn his torso to obscure her from Monoma's prying gaze, but from his giddy laughter, as he turned and left the gym, it seemed that the damage was done.

"Well," she sighed. "Sorry."

He scowled down at her.

"What the fuck are you sorry for?"

"I...this was a little more public," she said with a shrug. "I...I just wanted to kiss you."

"Tch..." he gently shifted her so he could stand up, dragging her with him. "Want me to go beat the shit out of him and make him swear not to blab?"

Surprisingly, she didn't feel that urge. "Is...is that what you want?"

"I always wanna beat the shit out of him."

She snorted and dropped her head back between her shoulders.

They hadn't lied to anyone.

There was no reason to feel guilty, right? It wasn't like they were dating.

"I mean. I don't really care," she said and looked momentarily surprised at that startled declaration. "But if you do," she added hurriedly. "Then threaten away."

He held her gaze for a moment before he threw a smirk down at her. "Eh," he said, flinging his arm around her shoulder. "Little prick ain't worth my time..."

She nodded happily, sinking into his side.

###



Oh, she was wrong.

She was so very wrong.

Apparently, word had spread quickly, and by the next morning, it was quite clear that people had opinions. A lot of opinions- opinions no one wanted to share, apparently- that they all had if their worried gazes were any indicator.

Not to mention the cold shoulder that Katsuki was getting from almost everybody. Even Kirishima seemed to feel somewhat torn about how to respond to the news. What news they had heard, she wasn't sure.

She wasn't sure how much Monoma had seen, enough to draw a conclusion, but certainly not enough to draw the right conclusion. Because, well, even she wasn't sure what the right conclusion was.

They weren't dating.

But they weren't not.

She understood the confusion, but she spent the whole day waiting on someone to ask her to talk to her. But no one had.

They were just being weird and evasive.

Their class had thoughts...and feelings. Thoughts and feelings that they didn't want to share.

Until lunch, when Mina pulled her aside.

"Is it true?!"

"Is what true?" she asked. She didn't want to be a brat, but this whole thing was starting to get on her nerves.

"Are you and Bakugo...?" she looked over her shoulder and leaned in. "Together?"

Ochako looked at Mina for a moment. She knew Mina cared for her- she had been so great through all of this. "No," she said. "We aren't together." Mina almost looked relieved, which made Ochako feel just a little bit defensive.

Maybe that was why she didn't let it lie.

“But if you’re asking whether or not Monoma did find us kissing in the gym, then yes, that is also true.”

Mina sputtered in surprise. “Uh, what?!” Ochako nodded in response. “You’re...you’re kissing him? But not dating him?”

She nodded slowly. “Yes,” she said. “It was on my list, remember.”

“Sure,” she said. “But maybe I was thinking...” Ochako raised an eyebrow, and Mina stepped back a little. “It... I...”

Mina was having trouble saying what she was feeling- but she was feeling something. They all were. And Ochako couldn’t help but jump to what was the unspoken belief behind that reservation.

Ochako was frail.

In need of rescue.

Not really a woman- just a sad broken girl.

She knew, objectively, that was not what Mina meant, but it was what she heard clothed in her words.

“I’m fine, Mina,” she said, her voice showing just a little bit of the sadness she was feeling. “It’s good. I’m good.”

Ochako moved to turn away, but she felt Mina’s hand on her wrist, keeping her in place.

“Ochako,” she said. “I’m...look, it’s good that you’re feeling yourself. It really is.” Ochako blinked furiously, trying to hold back her tears. “We love you, and no one wants to see you get hurt.”

She had a feeling that wasn’t going to be the case.

She was going to get hurt- but certainly not by Katsuki.

And from there, it only got worse.

Combat was rough. And she could see that no one was holding back on Katsuki. Once again, no one was talking, no one was saying anything, at least to her. And she hadn’t had the chance to talk to Katsuki yet, and she had therapy today, so she wouldn’t get the chance to talk to him until later that evening.

For his part, Katsuki seemed to be reverting back to his first-year self-

grinning like a gremlin and egging everyone on.

She didn't resent that.

She was pissed too.

Cold, angry looks followed Katsuki.

Concerned and worried looks followed her, along with assurances of "We're here if you need to talk."

As if she was some kind of victim and Katsuki was...

What?

What could they possibly be thinking about him to make them so weird?

"No one wants to embarrass you," said Tokoyami, walking beside her. She didn't really want to talk to anyone except Katsuki, but Tokoyami was probably at the top of the list of people that she could handle right now, and he had taken it upon himself to walk her to the bus stop.

"I have nothing to be embarrassed about," she grumbled. "I didn't do anything wrong."

"No one thinks you did-."

"And neither did Katsuki," she interrupted.

"I trust your decisions, Uraraka," he said. "You're not in need of a white knight. And whatever relationship you have with Bakugo is certainly no one's business but your own."

She gripped her bag strap tight and waited for the 'but.'

"But..." there it was. "People are concerned, which is understandable."

"Then they should talk to me," she said. "Ask me! Don't baby me and treat Katsuki like shit!"

Tokoyami nodded in stoic agreement. "I suppose it is good that you have a therapist to talk this out with for the next hour."

She nodded. "That's true. Hopefully, she can give me advice on how

not to bite anyone's head off."

"You can bite if you want," said Tokoyami. "You may have to, but...I think talk about it with your therapist to see how best to do it."

She nodded. "You're right," she said. "Thank you, Tokoyami!"

She gave him a quick, natural hug- in a way that she couldn't imagine 6 months ago but now didn't even give her a second thought- and then climbed into the bus.

###

"Hmmm..."

"Yeah."

"And no one is talking to you?"

"No," she said, sinking back in her chair.

"And why does that bother you?"

"Because Katsuki is not a predator, and that's how they are treating him, and I hate that."

She hated it so much.

It made her blood boil.

"But none of that is true..."

"Of course, it's not! Katsuki is..." her voice faltered, overwhelmed with the rising frustration. "He...he doesn't deserve to be treated like that."

"No, he doesn't."

"He's good!"

Dr. Shoko nodded. "From all you've told me, I would agree with that as well."

"And they know that," she said, throwing her hands up. "They fucking know that! They know him! They should know better! That's what's so frustrating for me."

“They should.” Ochako sighed and dropped her head into her hands. “So far, you’ve only talked about Katsuki,” remarked Shoko. “What about you?”

Ochako felt her eyes prickle. Of course, she felt something too, but that felt a little too tender. Feeling angry on Katsuki’s behalf, as much as she hated that she had to be, felt a little less vulnerable and made her feel a little less shitty.

She could feel powerful when she was mad at Katsuki.

She couldn’t feel powerful if she thought too long about what all of this made her feel.

“I feel...I feel...small...” she said. “It makes me feel small and weak. Like they don’t look at me and see a hero.”

“And that makes sense,” said Dr. Shoko. “That you feel that way is valid. But do you think that is the absolute real reality?”

Ochako shook her head. “No,” she sighed reluctantly. “No, I don’t.”

“What is the reality?”

“That they love me a lot,” she said with a reluctant sigh. “That they are worried about me. That they have seen me hurting for the past few months, and they don’t want to see that anymore. And that this... as much as I want it to be, is not a normal situation. They’ve seen me be vulnerable, and now they are worried about me.”

“That all is probably true too,” said Dr. Shoko. “They have been a part of your recovery, and it’s not entirely plausible to ask them to stop being involved now.” Ochako inhaled sharply. “And I don’t think you want that either.”

“I don’t want that,” she affirmed. She was so grateful to them- loved them all so much.

“This is not at all unusual, Ochako,” said Dr. Shoko. “And this is yet another way that trauma shapes us.”

“Tch...oh good more,” she groused.

Dr. Shoko laughed. “I know,” she said. “One day, we will get through all of them. But from what you’ve told me about your friends and your class, this one won’t be too difficult to get past. It will just take you

being firm and clear on your boundaries.” Ochako nodded, not interrupting. “Sometimes, in cases like yours, good friends will step up in new ways and in very involved ways to help during a time of trauma. And when the person who was traumatized starts to get stronger and better, it can be hard for those friends to know when it’s time to step back and let go a little. Usually there needs to be a period of readjustment. It’s not usually rooted in anything other than love, but if left unchecked, it can manifest as control and entitlement. It’s important for them and you to know that just because they were a part of your recovery does not mean that they are entitled to unfettered access to your healing.”

“How do I do that?” she asked.

“You talk to them,” said Dr. Shoko. “Which I know will be hard for you to do, because at your healthiest you are a giving and kind person who wants everyone to know that they matter to you, but remember, boundaries are not unkind. In fact, they make us kinder people.”

Right.

Boundaries.

Those things that felt so random and sporadic to her.

But she was getting better at it.

She just hoped it wouldn’t cost her someone she loved. She didn’t want to lose Katsuki, and she didn’t want to lose her friends.

###

Ochako was ready to be the bigger person, ready to understand and listen and talk and get this all sorted. That had been the plan. But that plan was, as it goes at UA, interrupted when the door to the dorms blew open as a wave of ice exploded into sharp bits, and Shoto flew out the door, landing on his ass and then rolling onto his feet.

And, of course, Katsuki exploded out after him, palms blazing.

“Say that again, motherfucker!!” he roared.

“Kacchan, don’t,” yelled Deku, following him out. Shoto was back on his feet, both sides activated.

And just like that, the good will inside of her shriveled up and

disappeared as she ran forward, taking up space between the two feuding boys.

“What the hell is going on here?!”

She whipped around to glare at Shoto, whose fire and ice retracted at her proximity. Katsuki was seething, palm still sparking, eyes bright and livid.

She snapped her gaze to the door where Deku and Iida were waiting. They turned away before her angry gaze pried any answers from them.

“Come on,” she growled through gritted teeth, marching toward the door. She looked over her shoulder at Shoto, who stood frozen. “Right. Now!” She ordered, and Shoto immediately jumped to follow her, like a scolded puppy.

She shoved past Deku and Iida to find an even bigger audience in the common area, which showed the evidence of a brawl. She rolled her eyes and stopped at the couch, gripping the back of it tight as she breathed in.

*Boundaries.*

She looked up to see Kirishima talking to Katsuki at the door, trying to calm him down.

“All right,” she said. “Now- what the hell is going on here? Why were you guys fighting?”

Shoto looked at her calmly. “Because he has the temper of a four-year-old.”

Her eyes flashed dangerously. “Now is not the time to test me, Shoto,” she said. “What happened?”

He looked at her for a moment before crossing his arms. “I only expressed a sentiment that many here share, and he attacked me...”

“Not held by me,” offered Jirou from the table. “I told everyone to mind their damn business.”

“Same,” said Shinso, briefly looking up from his phone as though he had only realized that he wasn’t alone.

“While I do not condone violence on UA grounds,” said Iida, voice

tentative. “Todoroki was merely asking about Bakugo’s intentions.”

She raised a skeptical eyebrow. “And I’m sure he said it exactly like that.”

“Well,” said Iida. “We- uh- there are a few of us that are concerned that *perhaps* Bakugo took advantage of a close and trusting friendship during a time when you are particularly vulnerable.”

Ochako has rarely, if ever, seen red.

Ever.

She looked over at Katsuki, who was shoving Kirishima off despite the red-heads attempt to keep him away.

She inhaled.

Exhaled.

“First of all,” she said, her voice low and shaky and squeezed through clenched teeth. “If you have any concerns about me- in the future- I would prefer it if those conversations included me.”

“O...of course,” said Iida. “W-We were going to...”

“Second,” she barked, her eyes snapping up to Iida, silencing him. “While it is none of anyone else’s business what is going on between me and Katsuki, whatever it is, it is entirely consensual, and I am fucking insulted that you would think it’s not.”

Deku sputtered, turning red. “Oh, of course, we know that,” he assured. “No one thinks that Kacchan would ever hurt you, but we were worried that maybe...” he looked away, red-faced and ashamed. She looked at Iida, who seemed to be groping for words as well.

She had expected this.

No one could say why they didn’t like it.

They just *felt* like it was wrong.

Because of how they saw her.

Because some part of her was still small and frail in their eyes. Despite his taking the brunt of their confusion, this really had nothing to do with Katsuki.



They would have acted like this with anyone... because it was her.

"You're saying," she said, letting out a long breath. "That you don't trust me to make decisions for myself."

"Ochako..." she looked up at Katsuki's voice coming through her anger. He was still red-faced and fuming, but he was momentarily controlling it. "You don't owe these assholes an explanation."

She looked at him for a moment and offered a small smile.

She didn't owe them one. But she wanted to give one. Because at the end of the day, these people loved her. She knew that. They were her family. She had fucked up so many times in these last few months- tried to push so many people away. She had been cold and cranky and awful to people who loved her.

And they had forgiven her.

They had messed up, big time, but they would get through it because that was what family does.

"We trust you," said Tsu, tentatively.

"Yeah," said Deku. "We were just worried that you weren't coping well and that..." his voice dropped under Katsuki's withering stare.

"While granted we aren't the best of friends," Shoto said, throwing a side-ways look at Katsuki. "I do not have such a low opinion of him to assume that what the two of you have isn't consensual. Rather, the worry is that considering your emotional state, that a gentleman may have been more inclined to wait..."

"What the fuck did I tell you about running your mouth?" growled Katsuki. Ochako wrapped her hand around his forearm to pull him back before he jumped over the couch to strangle him. Ochako met his furious gaze and shook her head.

Surprising most of the room, Katsuki relented- but he remained at her side, fuming and silent like a raging bull.

"Okay," Ochako continued, her voice tight. "I am pissed. So fucking pissed right now I want to scream." She could do this. She could do this. "However, I appreciate how weird this whole situation is and that you are concerned. I...I know that I've...I've not been myself for a long time and that you all had to adjust how you cared about me and

how you were with me, and that adjusting again may be hard. So,” she breathed out slowly. “Let’s use this time to clarify and lay down boundaries.” She looked around the room and raised her head a little higher. She could do this. “First, I approached Katsuki because I wanted to. I am trying to figure some stuff out about myself, and I trusted Katsuki, both as a friend and as someone I felt safe to explore with.”

“Yeah,” said Deku, his voice careful and quiet. “I get that but isn’t it a little early to be...uh...exploring in that way.” If it weren’t for the fact that she was so angry, Ochako may have been inclined to laugh at poor Deku. He looked physically in pain, torn between a love for Ochako and a respect for Katsuki and not certain which one to give preference to in this moment.

“That was my concern as well,” said Tsu. “I love you and trust you, Ochako, but it feels really fast.”

“All right,” she said, her temper flaring up, looking between Tsu and Deku. “All right, so what is the allotted time?” Tears of frustration bit at her throat. “When...When according to *you* .” She turned to look at Iida. “When am I allowed to feel normal again? When am I allowed to be horny again? You tell me! What is the acceptable length of mourning before a victim of assault can make out with her hot friend?! Huh?”

Deku blushed furiously and looked away, and Iida and Tsu looked appropriately scolded.

“Unless you are me, Katsuki, or my therapist, none of you have any say in this.” No one protested that. “You are all allowed to be worried about me. Because you love me. And I appreciate that. But in cases where you are worried about *me* , I would love it if you could talk to *me* . I get it that when I first came back, it was all different, so you had to be careful with me. But I’ve worked my ass off to get stronger, and you should respect me enough to recognize that and not do this weird paternalistic bullshit where you threaten the guy instead of asking me how I feel.” Hot tears spilled from her eyes, and she felt Katsuki’s hand graze against her wrist.

She looked up and wiped her tears from her cheeks. “I communicated clearly with Katsuki and with my therapist, and I know what I’m doing. I am so grateful for all of the ways you guys have helped me.” She pressed her heel to her cheek and shoved away more tears. “I love you all so much. But...but that does not mean you get to dictate my

healing.” She pointed at herself. “Because I...I saved myself, guys. I think sometimes you all forget that. I saved myself- not a pro, not any of you- I saved myself, so it’s not fair for you to treat me like I’m made of glass.”

She was hurt, and now that replaced anger. Her friends, for their part, looked chastised.

“Uraraka,” said Iida. “You’re right, we...”

She held her hand up, silencing him. “Look,” she said. “We are still friends. I’ll forgive you for screwing up in the same way you all have forgiven me over and over. But I’m too tired to hear it right now.” She moved to walk toward the stairs. “And you owe Katsuki an apology too.” She said, narrowing her eyes at Shoto. She turned to continue her walk to the stairs, but, once again, because she was on a roll now, and she wanted to get it all out, so they never had to deal with this again.

And she was feeling a little bit more powerful again.

A little less defeated.

Maybe Dr. Shoko was right about boundaries.

“Also,” she added. “For the record...” from the edge of her hearing, she could have sworn she saw Jirou bury her face in Shinso’s shoulder to stop a laugh. “While kissing Katsuki may have somewhat been a part of a healing experiment, I also really really like it...like, a lot!”

Deku made a noise and looked down.

Iida cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses.

Shoto actually looked a little amused at the outburst.

“And not to play *that* card,” she said. “But I’ve had a hell of a year, and going through all that shit does not mean I’m not allowed to want things that just are fun and just make me happy. I’m allowed to enjoy things like a normal teenage girl. So, if making out with my best friend who just happens to be crazy hot and can just *happen* to be able to bench press my entire body weight a couple times over makes me happy, then dammit, I think I’ve earned that!”

Shoto’s amused look turned into a stifled laugh into his hand.

They would be okay.

But she needed to say all of that.

She finally looked up at Katsuki- whose angry face was now replaced with a feral grin, looking pleased as a freakin' peacock.

"Uh- assuming said friend is...is down with it too," she stuttered out awkwardly.

"Killin' it, Ochako," whispered Shinso to the side of her.

She waved vaguely. "Thanks...I'm done now."

She turned to leave; she didn't have to look behind her to see who was following her, but the "See ya, fuck-faces" drove it home.

###

Katsuki had been a hairsbreadth away from murder. Those fucking busybodies had no fucking right to sully up what he and Ochako had with their dumb assumptions.

He had been ready to shatter teeth and skulls.

But he found- somehow- watching Ochako lay into them with her own brand of punishment was equally satisfying.

And he would just jump over the huge boost to his ego that shot through him when she declared to a whole room of extras that not only had she picked him but that she liked kissing him. She was unabashedly into him. She liked kissing him- she was into him with unabashed certainty. It had been beautiful and sexy as hell watching her put down her boundaries like that- something that even Ochako from first year wouldn't have done.

But still- she was a nicer person than him, and while he may have found it all very thrilling, she looked near-tears when she threw herself onto his bed- face down, buried in his pillow, and letting out a low, long growl.

He crossed the room silently and sat on the edge of the bed, resting a hand on her back. "You good?" he asked, moving his palm in small circles. She groaned and turned her head, so she was looking at him with one eye.

"Are you okay?" she asked, and he felt suddenly very exposed. She

turned onto her side, so she was facing him, looking up with stupidly wide eyes, her face open with sweetness. "I'm sorry, Katsuki, I...I never would have asked you to do this if I thought they would think that..."

"Tch...I don't give a fuck what they think, Ochako," he said. "You know that, right?"

She sat up, her knees bent and tucked beneath her. "It doesn't make it okay," she said, voice soft. He shrugged. Honestly, the only reason he blew up was because fucking Icy-hot had accused him of using their friendship to take advantage of her.

He had a while ago made peace with the fact that whatever ended up happening with Ochako, that people would have worries, people would underestimate Ochako's strength and Katsuki's affection for her; that people would say he wasn't good enough for her when they only made each other better.

He could make peace with that.

But the implication that what they had been through together, what they had grown into together, had been anything other than good and pure was just too fucking much. He had done probably the most work he had ever done to know someone and to have someone question whether or not that had all been done just to get into her pants- that had been too much for him.

"Katsuki..." he must have taken too long to respond. She went up onto her knees and scooted toward him until she was nestled between his knees and she could rest both of her hands on his shoulders. "I understand if you don't want this or want to take a break, or..."

His eyes snapped up to her golden-brown eyes- filled with warmth and so much love for him; it was almost overwhelming.

"Is that what you want?" he asked.

She raised an eyebrow. "Did you...did you not hear my epic speech?" He snorted and settled his hands on her hips, pulling her closer to him. "Because it was badass, and I feel like it was pretty damn clear." He pressed his forehead to hers.

"Fucking right, it was badass."

And she rewarded him with a breathless giggle that tickled his skin as

the hands at his shoulders dropped down his arms as she pulled him into a tight hug, burying her face in his neck.

"I like it too," he grumbled into the top of her head.

"Hmmm?"

"Kissing you," he said. "I like it too."

He felt her smile against his neck, and it was stupidly adorable. She looked up at him, and every emotion was shining in her face, and he wondered if it would ever stop overwhelming him when he saw it.

"Good," she said, leaning in toward him, but she stopped when there was a knock at the door, eliciting a growl from Katsuki.

"The fuck do they want now?" he grumbled.

"Bakubro, it's me!"

Katsuki considered for a moment ignoring the asshole.

Sure he never accused him of anything, but he sure as hell had been acting weird about the whole thing.

But he also knew the asshole was stubborn as hell. And no way could he enjoy anything with Ochako, knowing he may be sitting out there. "One sec," he grumbled, letting go of her and going to the door. He opened it with a little too much force and stepped out into the hall before Kiri could attempt to enter into the room.

"What the fuck do you want?" he asked, arms crossed angrily over his chest.

"Look, man, I just...I came here to say that I was sorry." Katsuki glared down at the red-head, who, to his credit, looked remorseful.

"Whatever," he said. "It's nothing, Shitty Hair."

"No," said Kirishima, with a shake of his head. "It's not nothing." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I...I never in a million years thought you were hurting her; I need you to know that."

He did know that.

Ochako was right. The whole situation was weird- even for the people who had no business sticking their nose in but certainly would.

“I swear,” he affirmed resolutely. “I just- felt a kind of way about it, but she was right. That wasn’t fair to either of you. She’s a badass, and you’ve been nothing but good to her. So...I’m...I’m sorry for doubting you.”

Katsuki waited for a moment-usually- he would pretend he didn’t care or else tear him a new one, but surprisingly neither were a priority.

It had bothered him.

And the apology had meant something.

“Whatever,” he said, again, but this time without the venom so that Kirishima would know he was accepting the apology. “Now fuck off.”

Kirishima grinned at him knowingly.

“Fucking what?”

Kirishima’s smile only grew wider. “That was super manly of Uraraka to stand up for you like that.”

“Tch...”

“It’s good,” he said. “You deserve to be with someone who looks at you like that.”

“Like what?” he snapped, defensive and scowling, but Kirishima just shrugged and backed away from him.

“Like you’re her hero.”

He wanted to punch Kirishima in the face just to knock that damn smirk off of his face, but he was already heading down the hall.

Whatever.

Ochako was waiting for him.

# And She Feels it All

## Chapter Summary

“I’ll see you in a couple of days, okay?”

“Sounds good; I’ll text you,” she said, squeezing Deku's shoulders in one more hug before she turned to catch up with Katsuki. And, somehow, bolstered by some confidence and courage that he just didn’t have, she reached for his hand like it was just the most natural and easiest thing for her to do now.

It was almost enough to distract him from what Deku had just said to her.

I’ll see you in a couple of days.

Why was he seeing her in a couple of days when Katsuki wasn’t going to get to see her for a week?

## Chapter Notes

Hey friends, thank you for your patience with this chapter :) My five jobs all were very demanding in the last few weeks so I couldn't sit down and write as much! I hope it was worth the wait.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ochako, it turned out, liked a lot of things. So many things.

Like mochi.

And chocolates.

And sugary coffee drinks that would make a normal person’s teeth ache.

And documentaries about space.

And laying in the grass and looking at the stars.

And one of the best things that was happening to her, more and more, was that she was slowly remembering all of them; being surprised by all of those things that had been locked away in her mind- things she had not been ready to touch, but now, finally, felt safe enough to take



out and turn over in her hand.

To see if they were still part of her.

And after their last final, she remembered how last year Mina had insisted that they dance out all of the stress and hair-pulling panic of the last few weeks together in Jirou's room. She had forgotten about that until she got the group text telling everyone to go to Jirou's room that night. She had forgotten until she heard the loud music the minute she stepped onto their floor.

She remembered when she stepped inside to find her friends already dancing around Jirou's room, how much she had enjoyed it that first year. It had been such a relief it had been after tears and stress and worry to let loose with these girls.

She hadn't really tried to dance since then.

The last time she had even attempted it, it had been for all of two seconds, when she had gone out to "celebrate" with all of these same girls, crowded onto a dance floor with loud music and strangers. But this was different- she was different. Then she couldn't imagine ever smiling again, ever dancing again, or spinning with reckless, wild abandonment.

It was so hard to imagine that so much had changed in the past 8 months; how she had gone from seeing no way out to collapsing in a giggling, breathless fit onto Jirou's bed to take a quick breather. Her phone had vibrated a few times in her pocket, so she took a moment to peak at it.

**Katsuki: You guys are so loud!**

She laughed at the mental image of Katsuki tucked away in his bed, tossing and turning and cursing the kids a few floors up and their blasted music.

He was such an old man.

**Ochako: Finals are over! It's time to celebrate!!**

**Katsuki: How about you wait to celebrate until you know if you passed, eh?**

Ochako rolled her eyes and typed out a quick response.

**Ochako: I passed! I had a good tutor 😊**

She took a drink of water as the song changed to an old favorite, one that sent Mina and Toru whooping and hollering and cheering and Tsu tugging at her insistently. She recognized the song, the lyrics, the beat- but most importantly, so did her body. It was already moving, buzzing with excitement to jump back into the dance circle. Before she did, her phone buzzed one more time.

**Katsuki: Have fun, Cheeks.**

She would.

She was.

###

Katsuki did not consider himself a clingy person.

In fact, no one would. He had let go of his mother's hand at 4 and never really tried to hold it again. He stood on his own two feet. He didn't crave physical affection or any attention that was not directly related to his abilities as a hero.

But he still felt anxious about the fact that they were going to be apart, even if it was only for a week and a half (heroes didn't get months for summer break, they spent it with their teachers, doing specialized trainings). But after the whole "you sent our kids to war" thing from first year, parents had bartered a small break from UA where their kids had a chance to rest and see their families.

Fair, he supposed.

Sure, he would prefer to spend that week and a half training, but it seemed no one asked his opinion. And he really hated it right now. The thought of being without her, the thought of not knowing where she was or if she was okay, or if she was having a bad day, that was a little unsettling for him.

And he knew, objectively, he had to get over that. He knew better than anyone that she could take care of herself, that she didn't need him. And he wasn't doing her any favors by hovering. But still, going to movie night just because she was going to be there and because it was her last night before she planned to go home....well, it may not be

hovering certainly did qualify as clingy.

But he would keep that to himself.

Everyone was always up his ass about being more social- so here he was, participating.

“Come sit with me, Katsuki,” she said, holding up the blanket she had draped over her. He rolled his eyes at the blanket, but he flopped down beside her and let her situate it over both of them, tucking them both in.

It didn’t matter that it was summer.

That it was warm outside and in the dorm.

She was always cold, it seemed; always had a blanket or a hoodie or fuzzy socks, or a Katsuki, close at hand. He wondered if that had always been true or it was one of the lingering effects of her captivity; he had never thought to notice before. He draped his arm along the back of the couch and let her tuck herself up against him, all ready to suck all of his warmth from his body.

But he didn’t mind because he was a clingy bitch, apparently.

From over the top of her head, he could see Shitty Hair grinning at him giddily- in the same way, he always did on the rare occasion where he and Ochako showed any kind of physical affection in front of people- such as it was.

For the most part, their odd arrangement remained largely out of sight from their peers, making it easy for them to forget. Except for Shitty Hair, because he was a nosy-ass busy-body and Katsuki’s number one-cheerleader.

So it meant he was always in Katsuki’s business.

“So you’re not dating her?” Kirishima had asked him after training a few weeks ago after tempers had died down enough for Katsuki to grudgingly entertain the question.

“No.”

“But you want to date her?”

He had considered not answering that at all. It was no one’s business. But, at the end of the day, he trusted Kirishima, and he hadn’t really

had the chance to talk about it with anyone, and for some reason, he really wanted to say it out loud.

“Yeah,” he answered. “Eventually. If- if she wants to?”

“Hmmm...” Kirishima considered. “So, you’re just waiting on her?”

He shrugged and squirted a stream of water from his bottle into his mouth and wiped his brow with his shirt before dropping to the mat to stretch. “Guess so.”

Kirishima made another noise, one that almost sounded concerned. “What?” asked Katsuki pointedly.

“Can I ask you something without you getting upset?”

“Probably not,” said Katsuki. “But that depends entirely on you.”

Shitty rolled his eyes, but he was nothing if not brave, especially when it came to concern for his friends. “You’re...you’re okay with the whole arrangement?”

That had been a surprise to hear. “Eh?”

“Well,” said Kirishima, leaning back on his arms. “I just I...I know how well you take care of her, and I just want to make sure you’re taking care of yourself too. For both of your sakes, you know? Ochako is...she’s incredible and cute and badass. But I just want to make sure that this isn’t...only for her sake, is it? I know she would never hold you back, but if someone else came along, would you...”

“Look,” he interrupted. Though he wasn’t mad, not really. If anything, there was a small part of him that didn’t mind that someone (aside from Ochako, of course) seemed to care about what he was feeling in the middle of all of this. “I get that it’s not the way things like this normally go.” Not that he knew from first-hand, but still, he could assume. “But she’s worth a little weird. And if we do this for a while and then she decides she doesn’t want anything else, then...well, I’ll move on. But, honestly, I can’t imagine wanting anyone else like I do her, so... I can be patient for a while.”

Shitty Hair curled his lips in as though he were trying to keep his smile from getting too big as he nodded. “Well, okay then,” he said with a shrug. “Sounds like you’re sure then.”

Katsuki hadn’t brought it up to her since their first conversation. It

was a delicate thing, both holding that hope and not holding it over her as an expectation that one day she may actually see a future with him.

Well, a specific kind of future.

He couldn't imagine a future that she wasn't somehow involved in, whether romantic or not. Though, even then, like so many things, he wondered if that would change anything. It was an odd facet of their relationship that their intimacy and knowing of each other had started off so intense, and only now was tapering into the slow and shy and uncertain.

So when her head lulled onto his shoulder in the dark common room, surrounded by their friends- he couldn't help but tense up just a little bit and look around to see if anyone noticed, but everyone, including Ochako, was staring, wide-eyed at the screen as a particularly intense action scene unfurled- it was hard for him to track though because her head was on his shoulder.

Not new-not new at all. She had put her head on his shoulder many times before.

But this was different. It all felt so normal, which made him just a little more anxious.

And then, at a particularly loud explosion, she jumped beside him, reaching up and grabbing at the hand that was hanging over the back of the couch, just above her shoulder. That *was* new. She had really only held his hand once before and not like this. He looked over her head at the sight of her fingertips curling into his.

And she held on for a good...well, 97 seconds, not that Katsuki was counting, before she seemed to notice. When she did notice, he felt her fingers unfurl from his, but before she could pull away, he curled his fingers in again, pulling her hand up into his palm, enclosing them with his.

He looked out the corner of his eye, testing her response. She was staring, wide-eyed at their joined hands, mouth parted in an adorable look of surprise, and then a slow smile. She sighed and let herself sink further into his side, more confidently tightening her hold on his hand.

An inexplicable blush burst out across the back of his neck that made him grateful for the darkness of the common room.

He liked holding her hand, and he didn't like that he was going to have to wait for another week and a half before he got the chance to do it again.

When the movie ended, Ochako took her sweet ass time saying goodbye and hugging several of her friends, knowing that she would be catching an early train to go home tomorrow. Katsuki lingered by the stairs, waiting for her to finish so he could walk her up. He was only half-listening until he heard Deku's annoying voice pipe up over the good-byes.

"I'll see you in a couple of days, okay?"

"Sounds good; I'll text you," she said, squeezing his shoulders in one more hug before she turned to catch up with Katsuki. And, somehow, bolstered by some confidence and courage that he just didn't have, she reached for his hand like it was just the most natural and easiest thing for her to do now.

It was almost enough to distract him from what Deku had just said.

*I'll see you in a couple of days.*

Why was he seeing her in a couple of days when Katsuki wasn't going to get to see her for a week?

His displeasure must have shown on his face because she looked over her shoulder at him as they went up the stairs and looked between his face and their hands, anxiously.

"What's wrong?" she asked, loosening her hold slightly. But he held onto her and continued to let her lead him up the stairs.

"Nothin'," he muttered. She made a noise like she wasn't convinced but didn't push. "Why are you seeing Deku in a couple of days?"

"He's coming to my house for a night over the break," she said, casual and light as they turned down her hallway. When they got to her door, she leaned up against it as she turned to face him. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

He nodded, still slightly distracted by the revelation. But he wasn't sure why. There was something like jealousy there, but not in the traditional sense. It wasn't like he was threatened by Deku. But there was something else there he couldn't name.

“Yeah,” he answered. “Yeah...someone’s gotta come get your ass out of bed.”

She scoffed and waved her hand at him. “No way,” she said. “I’ll be banging on your door at 5 am, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.” He raised a skeptical eyebrow, and she nodded. “You promised me crepes before I left,” she declared. “I’ll definitely get out of bed for that!”

“We’ll see...” he said, leaning down to her as the tug of her arms suddenly around his neck, letting him know she wanted a good night kiss, which he gave easily and willingly. When they broke away, her arms remained tight around his neck, hugging him tight before she let go.

When her door was shut, Katsuki turned away abruptly and marched down the hall, but not to return to his room. He was a man on a mission, and that mission took him straight to Deku’s room, where he pounded on the door, not giving a fuck who heard him.

Inside he heard stumbling and talking in hushed, secretive tones that made him roll his eyes. “Deku,” he barked. “Come out, it’s just me, and I don’t give a fuck that Icy Hot is in there!”

The door opened at a crack at first, and Katsuki’s hand shot out to push it open. “Hey, Kacchan.”

“Bakugo,” said Icy-Hot with a curt nod from where he sat on the bed.

Katsuki did not indulge any pleasantries and reared defensively on Deku. “Oi! Why are you going to visit Ochako over the break?”

Deku’s brow furrowed in confusion like he hadn’t heard the question right or was struggling to find context for it so that he could give Katsuki the answer he wanted. “Well,” he finally said. “B-because she’s my friend?”

Okay.

Okay, that checked out.

But...still...why did he feel all angry and offended inside.

“And I want to see her parents,” he added.

And the frustration flared up in his stomach all over again.

He glared at Deku. “You’ve met her parents?”

Deku cocked his head to the side and looked at him with the curiosity of a fucking labradoodle. "You haven't?"

It was all Katsuki could do NOT to punch him in the mouth right then and there, but instead, he turned his wrathful glare on Icy-Hot, who, as always, looked thoroughly unimpressed. "Hey, don't look at me like that," he said. "I haven't met her parents." Katsuki scoffed to hide the pout that was no doubt forming on his mouth. "But I'm also not Uraraka's boyfriend, so..."

"Shut the fuck up," he barked before sulking back to the door. "You're lucky Ochako likes you so damn much."

"Hmmm...same," said Icy-Hot.

Damn bastard. He always had to have the last word. So Katsuki just settled for throwing him a middle finger over his shoulder before he stepped back out into the hallway and slammed the door hard. Maybe class rep would show up to berate Deku for slamming his door and find Icy-hot in there after curfew.

The thought alone warmed Katsuki's angry cold insides.

###

Ochako was sure that something was up. She looked at Katsuki from across the table in the little café as he distractedly poked at his eggs. She, for her part, had scarfed down a crepe and a half (one with fruit under Katsuki's insistence) and was about to reach over and steal his bacon if he kept picking at it.

"All right," she said, finally, setting her tea down. "Why are you pouting?"

His eyes snapped up to her, looking truly affronted. "I'm not-."

"Yes, you are," she insisted. "And don't try and hide it from me, I know what a Katsuki pout looks like, and that, good sir, is a Katsuki pout!" She declared, pointing her fork at him.

He glared at her for a moment, and she was pretty sure she wasn't going to get any explanation from him when suddenly, he all but shouted in the tiny café because that was what Katsuki did when he felt anything that was the slightest bit overwhelming.

"Why does Deku get to meet your parents and not me!?"



Ochako's hand gripped just a little tighter around her ceramic teacup. That had not been what she had expected him to say. She had actually just thought his whole attitude was misplaced angst about missing her. That or else he was pissed that they had to take a week and a half break at all. She had not been expecting her parents to have anything to do with it.

"Well," she finally said. "Deku met my parents last year, so..."

"Why haven't I?" he asked, casting his eyes down at his plate, and Ochako felt herself internally and instinctively responding to the vulnerability in his body language.

"Uh...I didn't think you wanted to," she said. His eyes did go back up to her at that, and she could see the defensiveness brewing there, so she immediately moved to amend her statement. "I mean, I didn't think that you *didn't* want to," she assured. "I just didn't think it was something you particularly wanted to do either." She ran her thumb along the lip of her cup and shrugged. "I mean...I haven't met your parents either."

"Well," said Katsuki, bobbing his knee nervously under the table. "Maybe you should."

She stared at him for a moment- attempting to mine her way through all that was going on. Katsuki was, in many ways, a simple guy, but not in every way. There were moments where he felt unexpectedly strong about something, and sometimes it was hard to trace what those things would be.

"You want me to meet your parents?"

He let out a growl of frustration. "Dammit, Cheeks! I mean...I want..." She leaned forward attentively. "It's...whatever."

"Katsuki," she said, reaching across the table to cover his hand with hers. His palm remained flat against the table, but he didn't pull away from her touch. She ran her thumb over his knuckles soothingly. "Katsuki," she repeated until he brought his gaze back to hers. She smiled at him, warm and beaming. It wasn't often that Katsuki was the insecure one (at least that's how it felt from her end), and she wanted to be as good with him as he was with her.

"Katsuki, I...I know sometimes you are hesitant to tell me when you want things." His nose scrunched, and he opened his mouth, no doubt to argue, but Ochako cut him off quickly. "You are," she said

insistently. "I think sometimes you're afraid of telling me that you want things because you don't want me to feel pressured or rushed or do something just to make you happy." He snorted, but he didn't argue with her on that because, well, he couldn't. "But," she continued, wiggling her fingers under his palm so that she was holding his hand and not just laying her palm on the back of his. "I...I want you to tell me when you want things too. I know you're okay with me saying no, that's why..." He was the one she picked. The one whose hand she wanted to hold. The one who she wanted to kiss. The one she loved. "Why we work. So," she said again with a small smile. "Do you want to meet my parents, Katsuki?"

He shrugged. "I just think if that damn nerd met them, then I should too."

She couldn't help but inwardly roll her eyes at the competitive bite to his voice- but she did it inwardly because she knew that wasn't the only thing going on. Katsuki was telling her a lot right in this small conversation.

Telling her what he hoped for.

What he wanted.

What he saw when he looked ahead.

She didn't fully understand why yet (but she was starting to understand more and more every day), but he did want something with her.

And she wanted that something too.

She liked kissing him, and holding his hand, and talking to him, and sitting with him, and she supposed maybe these sunrise crepes could count as a date?

"I want you to mee them too," she said. "And I want to meet yours!"

It did seem odd that they hadn't done that yet. It was easy to forget sometimes how unusual their relationship was. Some things were so natural to them that it was easy to forget they weren't necessarily normal.

He nodded. "All right," he said. "Then how about I take the train to come see you the day before you leave and then ride back with you?"

Oh. He was serious. He had thought about this. He had a plan. She had just assumed they would say that and maybe sit on it for a few months. But Katsuki always had a plan, and she knew he didn't say things without meaning them, so...she really shouldn't be surprised.

"Okay," she said with a nod.

"And then...if you want...you can come with my family and me to the beach house for a few days."

"Oh, Katsuki," she said, shaking her head and gesticulating wildly with her fork. "I don't want to impose on a family trip."

He rolled his eyes. "You aren't," he said. "The old hag will be fucking thrilled that I'm bringing a..." his voice faltered over his word choice in a way that Ochako couldn't help but be charmed by.

"A girl," she offered with a soft smile. He shrugged, his face turning redder and redder by the second. "A girlfriend?"

She saw his body tense, and a look of surprise replaced the bashful, uncertain one that had been there seconds ago. He stared at her for a few seconds before managing a very quiet and elegant, "Eh?"

She bit her lip anxiously and picked at the edge of her thumb. "I don't...I don't know if that's still something you want, but if... if it is..."

She felt his hand turn beneath hers, allowing him to wrap his fingers around her wrist. And just like that- the surprise was gone, and it was replaced by that unique single-minded intensity that made her feel like she was the only person in the whole damn world.

"It is," he said with a firm nod- leaving no room for doubt about where he was but inviting any doubt about where she may be. She had told him three months ago that she didn't know for sure what she would want from him; what she would be able to give him.

She had thought at the time that it would take a long time to know for sure. She had thought it would take years, but maybe she had been underestimating herself. Underestimating Katsuki. Underestimating what they meant to each other.

There was still a lot she knew she wasn't ready for. There were a lot of things she wouldn't be able to give him yet, and if it came down to it that she couldn't, she knew she would be able to tell him. And she

may have to let him go because she wouldn't want to trap him in a relationship with someone who couldn't be everything he needed.

But now she could see herself wanting something like that- she could see herself deserving that kind of happiness. And, right now, she wanted Katsuki.

"Okay," she said. "I want that too."

A triumphant happy smirk curled onto his lips. "Good."

"It is good," she said, tucking her hair behind her ear and shifting in her seat. He was still holding her hand. Like he wanted to hold her hand. Like he liked it as much as her. "And..." she added quickly. "At least ask your parents, and if they are okay with it, then yeah." She nodded happily. "I would like to go!"

Other than anger, Katsuki kept a lot of his emotions close to his chest, but she could see the pleased little smirk tugging at his lips- satisfied with her answer. After they finished breakfast, and Ochako ate some of his bacon, Katsuki walked her down to the train station.

And she never let go of his hand.

###

Ochako was not prepared for what she would feel when she stepped off the train. She had not entirely planned for what would happen when she saw her parents waiting for her and found them smiling, bright and wide and happy like they had done last summer when she had come home for a weekend.

It wasn't strained or faked.

Their eyes weren't filled with pity or sadness.

They were filled with love. Like she was their whole world.

And she wasn't sure what to do with all the love that she felt at once. She hadn't loved them from a place of health and wholeness in a long time. Her love, so far, had been offered shakily, broken, falling apart, just like she had been. But now she remembered, fully, how much they meant to her, how much her heart was bursting with love for them, now that her heart was a little stronger to feel that bursting again.

And now, she felt all of it, all of it at once. And she wasn't afraid of it.

She ran across the platform this time- eager and happy, and jumped into her dad's arms, and he held her tight again in his familiar bear hugs, not like he was afraid that she was going to shatter in his arms. Her mother came up behind her and wrapped both of them in a hug.

In that way that always made Ochako feel like her mom was larger than life. It always felt like she could hold so much, and no one would even know it because she just never let on.

Like it was light as a feather to her.

And that had been one of many reasons it had been hard to look her mom in the eye after everything. Because then, Ochako could see the pain there, see the weight of what she was carrying.

But now, she felt it again, that safety and security that came from being loved so completely by the people who knew her best in the world.

And she remembered again- that thing that had been long inside of her for so long.

Her *why* .

Why she had gone to UA.

Why she wanted to become a hero.

A why she had kept to herself out of shame and doubt or a belief that it wasn't a noble enough reason. She had felt guilt and shame and uncertainty about so many things over the past few months, and she was learning how to cope with those.

But it seemed the tools she was getting to deal with that didn't only impact that one area of her life but had, without her knowledge, spread throughout her whole being. Shaping and changing her in ways she was only just now beginning to notice.

Because now she felt only pride and confidence and certainty as she held her reasons "why" and pressed happy kisses into both of their cheeks.

She would likely feel shame and guilt over many things still, and she was still working through so much of it.

But this... *this* ...shouldn't be one of them.

###

Katsuki had barely talked to Ochako since he dropped her off at the train station, but when he did, she sounded happy and exhausted, and that made him feel good. He had been worried that she would get overwhelmed by it all, by her parents, and her family, and by being away from her therapist for so long.

It wasn't that he was like any of those dumb extras who underestimated her. It was just that he knew her, and he was slightly more intimate with the possible things that could trigger her. And he hated when that happened. He knew it was part of the journey she was on. But still, he hated seeing her hurt and sad and unmoored.

He liked seeing her happy, and laughing, and certain, and confident.

Like she sounded right now on this visit home. Unlike her last time home at Christmas, she was staying busy on this trip.

Busy seeing family that she hadn't seen since before she had been taken.

Busy helping her mom on the farm and her dad on the construction site- no doubt showing off the new-found control of her quirk.

Busy catching up with old friends from middle school.

Busy with family game nights...

But the night before he was leaving to see her, they finally had a chance to talk on the phone for more than 3 minutes, and Katsuki could barely enjoy it because, well, he actually was nervous about meeting her parents.

Earlier that day, he had lasted about thirty minutes pretending he wasn't before he cracked and asked his parents what he should wear and what he should cook for them.

The Old Hag had, of course, ruffled his hair like he was a damn dog and made him regret asking her for anything, ever.

*"Look at you," she said. "Actually, taking this shit seriously, Katsuki, who knew?!"*

"What did you tell them about me?" he asked Ochako as he flopped

back onto his bed.

“What do you mean?” she asked, and he could have sworn he heard the playful lilt in her voice, like she was messing with him on purpose.

He scowled, and he knew she could hear it through the phone. “You know what the fuck I mean!”

She giggled. “That the boy who tried to blow me up at the Sports Festival is coming!? Yeah, they know!”

“HEY!” He heard her cackle on the other end of the phone.

“I’m just kidding, Katsuki,” she said. “You do know that I talk to them multiple times a week. Your name has come up once or twice.”

“Tch...you know what I mean,” he muttered, falling back onto his pillow and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“That you’re my boyfriend?”

“Yeah,” he said, trying not to sound too much like he cared either way what they knew. “Just so I...you know...know how to act around ‘em.”

“I told them,” she said. “Is that okay?”

Apparently, he had done too good a job hiding what he had wanted the answer to be because now she sounded a little insecure.

“Of course it is,” he answered brusquely. “Why the hell wouldn’t it be?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I guess we just didn’t say specifically who we were telling.”

“Whoever the fuck we want,” he said before returning to the conversation at hand. “And your parents didn’t care?”

She snorted. “I mean, I am seventeen, Katsuki. They’ve never been particularly overly protective, and they’ve always trusted me to make my own decisions.”

“Yeah,” he said. “But given the situation, I could see how they would be a little...”

“Katsuki,” she said, a slight warning in her voice. “Do I need to give you the same speech I did when everyone found out about us?”

“Oi,” he barked defensively. “I am not trying to tell you what to do, and I’m not treating you like a kid; I’m just...”

“Katsuki,” she interrupted firmly, stopping him from barreling forward. “Not that part. I meant the part about you being good enough for me. The part where you are not just some random guy who couldn’t give two shits about me, but literally one of my favorite people in the world?”

He scoffed, but there was no reason to hide the pleased grin that spread across his face when he was alone in his room.

“...Katsuki, they are excited to meet you,” she assured. “And when I told them you wanted to cook dinner, my momma just about fell in love with you, so I don’t think you’ll have any issues.”

That did sate his worry just a little bit.

“You having fun, Cheeks?” he asked, redirecting the conversation.

“Yeah,” she answered. “I am. It’s been a good visit home.” She let out a breath, and he could picture the way her cheeks puffed out. “The first visit home that’s felt normal.”

“That’s good,” he said. “I’m glad.”

“But I’m excited to see you,” she continued. “I’ve missed you.” Her voice was small and a little unsure when she said it like she wasn’t sure if she was saying too much or being too mushy or something like that.

She wasn’t.

“Yeah,” he said. “Me too, Ochako.”

It was true. It had been the longest they had been apart since she had come back, and, like he said, he had apparently become a clingy jackass because he had certainly been missing her.

“Good,” she breathed out, sleepily.

“We should go to bed,” he said. “It’s past my bedtime, and I have to get up early tomorrow.”



“Yeah,” she muttered, but like she had no intention of listening. “Just five more minutes,” she said. “I haven’t talked to you in forever.”

Hmmm...so maybe she was a little clingy too.

Not that he minded.

“All right,” he said. “Five more minutes, but then I need some beauty sleep if I’m going to sweep your parents off their feet.” She laughed, but that laugh turned into a yawn. “Five minutes, Cheeks,” he repeated. “Better make the most of them...”

“Kay...” she said, her voice trailing off tiredly.

She wasn’t even gonna talk!?

Fine. But *he* was still hanging up in five minutes.

He didn’t care how damn soft he was for her. He was NOT, adamantly refused, to be one of those people who stayed on the phone with their sleeping partner.

Nope.

Not in a million years.

Probably not...

###

Katsuki wasn’t off the train for more than five seconds before he was getting a face full of Ochako’s hair and a bone-crushing hold around his neck.

“Katsuki!” She declared excitedly.

“Tch... you knew I was coming,” he said. “Why do you sound so surprised?”

“I’m not,” she said, kissing him quickly on the cheek. “I’m just happy to see you.”

He rolled his eyes, but even that couldn’t keep his pleased preening under wraps as she settled down onto her feet. Another smart-ass remark was about to roll off his tongue, but it didn’t quite make it out

because he was suddenly too distracted.

Stunned even as he fully looked down at her, taking her in.

He wasn't sure why, but he couldn't quite bring himself to look away.

And it wasn't just because he hadn't seen her in a while.

It was something else.

His eyes roved searchingly over her face as he absently tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, trying to figure out what it was. Except he couldn't decide on just one thing. Her eyes looked more golden and bright; her cheeks looked rounder and rosier than he had seen them; she had clearly been spending a lot of time in the sun.

And underneath all of that was an ease of breath he hadn't seen in her in a long time.

And he remembered, suddenly, from first year that Ochako Uraraka who would do anything in the fucking world for her parents. She had come in third in the entrance exam, fought like hell in the sports festival, pushed herself to be better and stronger so that she could help her parents.

So she could take care of them.

And it struck him now, for the first time, that he was seeing the strength they gave her up close.

It was something else.

"W-what is it?" she asked, pulling away with a little laugh. She reached up and touched at her mouth. "Is something on my face?" His eyes went to where her fingertips rested on the pink, soft skin. He reached out and grabbed her wrist lightly before tugging it away from her lips as he leaned down toward her.

She let out a small noise of surprise at the sudden movement, but she was also fighting back an expectant smile as she tipped her face up toward his. He stopped a few centimeters away from her.

"Nah," he answered. "Nothing on your face."

She went up onto her toes one more time to close the distance between them, remedying the situation.

###

Before Ochako took him back home, they made a stop at the store so they could get the ingredients that Katsuki needed for the meal he was cooking for them. She could tell that he was relieved to hear that it would be just them for a bit, that his interactions wouldn't be under the scrutiny of her parents.

Because she could tell he was anxious.

She wasn't exactly sure what he was anxious for, but she expected she would be feeling much of the same when she met his parents tomorrow. But the truth was, he had nothing to be nervous about. While both her parents had a few questions about him, all they had known of him up until then was that he was the boy who she had fought in the Sports Festival and the one who had made the past few months survivable.

As far as her parents were concerned, Ochako didn't think Katsuki understood that he had already endeared himself to them in every possible way.

It was an odd thing about him, she thought as she watched him carefully survey the produce, that he had such a huge ego in so many ways but was also equally insecure in so many ways. And she felt a bit that he felt he had to prove he deserved her.

It was like he had separated himself into two, a person and a hero.

He was a good hero- and he knew that.

But Ochako often wondered if he knew he was a good person too. She wondered if he felt like that was what he was trying to prove sometimes.

Which was ridiculous, as far as Ochako was concerned.

He was a good person.

He was her favorite person.

It was why she wasn't at all worried or insecure about her home being a little smaller, about the chickens she had to shoo as they made their way through the lawn, groceries in tow. And it was why she wasn't worried about her parents meeting him.

She knew her parents, and she knew Katsuki.

And she knew everything would be fine.

###

Ochako was right because she knew them all better than anyone. They were some of the people she loved most in the world, after all. Her dad postured like a normal dad and shook Katsuki's hand a little harder than necessary, and Katsuki returned it in kind. Her mom had been overly familiar (and maybe a little emotional) when she met Katsuki, hugging him tight to communicate all the "Thank-you"s that she no doubt wanted to say but chose not to, for both Ochako's sake and Katsuki sake.

But both of them were incredibly warm and welcoming, as she expected them to be. Her mom seemed absolutely charmed by the fact that Katsuki was cooking and she didn't have to, and she was even more sold when the delightfully aromatic scents filled their home.

And by the third time her dad came in acting impatient for when dinner would be ready, Ochako answered him by throwing a pepper at his head and telling him to get out.

"Maybe if you weren't in here distractin' the boy..." her dad returned, snatching the pepper out of the air and popping it into his mouth with a flourish. Ochako scowled from where she was sitting on the counter beside Katsuki as he worked several pans at once, stirring and flipping and sauteing.

"I ain't distractin' him," she said. "I'm helpin'."

He swatted her knee. "Really," he said, eyeing her as she reached into one of the pans to grab a grilled onion and pop it into her mouth. "Because it looks to me like you're eatin'!"

"Taste-testin'," she corrected.

Katsuki snorted beside her, and she smacked his shoulder. "I am!"

"Uh-huh," he said. "You know dam- dang well that I don't need a taste tester."

"He's right," she said with a shrug. "Katsuki's food always tastes good."

He smirked triumphantly at her before taking a piece of miso-fried zucchini and bringing it up to her. "How's this?"

"Thought you didn't need a taste-tester," she snarked, blowing on the offered snack before opening her mouth and snatching it from the prongs.

"Ochako!" Ochako's head turned to the playful reprimand from her mother, the zucchini flopping in her mouth like a tongue. "It's all well and good for you to act like a heathen when it's just us, but we have company!"

Ochako gobbled down the vegetable in one bite as her mother reached out and pretended to wipe at the nonexistent food at the corner of her mouth.

"Everyone in this house is so mean to me," she pouted.

"What the fu-...did I do," asked Katsuki, once again barely catching himself. Ochako felt like she should tell him he didn't have to watch his language so diligently. After all, she had been laughing at her daddy's swear words since she was old enough to know how to talk, maybe even before then.

"You said you didn't need a taste-tester," she said, crossing her arms. "That is literally the only thing I have to offer in the kitchen!"

"That's not true," said her mother, handing her a stack of plates. "You can set the table."

Ochako scooted off the counter and took the plates. "Fiiine," she said with an exasperated sigh. "I guess I just have to do everything around here."

"Guess so," said her mother, patting her cheek sweetly.

The rest of the night went by in similarly good spirits. They had dinner together, and Katsuki answered questions about his time at UA, his hopes as a hero, his aspirations to be number one, and anything else her parents could think to ask.

But, honestly, she knew some of it was for the sake of politeness. They knew a lot about him already. They knew how much he meant to her, even before she would have called him anything other than a friend. But the difference was, she hoped, they could see how much he cared about her too.

After dinner, Ochako lingered in the kitchen with her mother after Katsuki, and her dad went to the living room. Katsuki under her dad's insistence that he had to help him pick out a movie for Ochako's last night there. Katsuki had looked at her pleadingly, like he wasn't sure if he trusted her dad's explanation for *why* he wanted to get Katsuki alone, but he was a good sport.

And while Ochako and her mom scooped the bowls of ice cream, Ochako couldn't help but look over at her, expectant and hopeful.

"So..."

"So," her mom returned. "So what?"

"You know what," said Ochako, bringing out the whipped cream, sprinkles, and other toppings that she knew she and her dad liked on their ice cream. "You met Katsuki."

"That I did," she said, with a small smile, not saying anymore, which caused Ochako to turn and face her. She didn't know why she was suddenly feeling insecure. She hadn't been lying when she had told Katsuki that she wasn't worried, that her parents already like him. But she was just so used to people having opinions about what she did that it felt odd that her own mother was holding back now.

"Well," she said, slowly, cleaning off the sticky edges of the bowls. "He's a very good cook."

"Uh-huh..."

"He swears a lot," she said. "But then, so does your father."

"Yeah..."

"He was a good sport, but you could tell that the small-talk was really wearing him out."

"Yeah," she said, her shoulders falling and her voice growing smaller. "He's...he's not much into small talk."

Her mother rolled her eyes and turned to lean up against the counter to face her. "Ochako," she said with a light laugh. "He makes you happy. Do you really think I care about anything other than that?"

She shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "I just... he really means a lot to me."

"I know that," her mom said. "Anyone with eyes can see that you too are smitten with each other."

Ochako bit her lip to hold back the cheesy grin from breaking out on her face. "Yeah?"

Her mom nodded. "Yeah," she said. "He looks at you like you're the center of the whole damn universe, Ochako."

Ochako warmed at hearing that. She knew that, of course. That was exactly how she felt when he looked at her when it was just the two of them, but for her parents to see it too...well, that meant everything to her.

"Mom," she said finally, her head falling to the side as she looked at this woman who loved her so much and taught her so much and had given so much for her. "Don't swear."

"I'm a grown woman, Ochako," she said. "I'll swear whenever I want!"

"Heathen," scolded Ochako, picking up two bowls of ice cream while her mom picked up the other two. "Now come on," she said. "Let's get back in there before dad says something rude to Katsuki."

"Eh," said her mom. "He seems like someone who can take his fair share of Uraraka nonsense."

Fair enough.

###

Katsuki had a surprisingly good night's sleep on the Uraraka couch, and being woken up by the sunlight pouring through the wide windows in their living room got him out of bed quickly. His and Ochako's train didn't leave until noon, so he could expect not to see her awake until ten.

Which was good.

If there were two things he wouldn't grudge Ochako (in the ocean of things he knew in his heart he would never grudge her), it was sleep and food, things that just a few months ago she only got by the skin of her damn teeth. So he liked for her to indulge in either of those things when she could.

But sleeping in was something hard for him to do. So he woke himself

up with pushups and sit-ups in the middle of the living room, listened to a podcast, got ahead on some reading for the start of the third year, and, by the time he heard the sound of their farm animal stirring, he had moved to the kitchen to start breakfast.

Katsuki was already setting about making breakfast in the kitchen when Uraraka-san- Satoru- came in through the front door- looking like he had started his workday three hours ago.

“Didn’t Ochako tell ya that you didn’t have to cook for us,” he said with a good-natured laugh. “We aren’t like Ochako; we actually know how to feed ourselves.”

“I don’t mind,” he said.

“All the same,” he said, moving to the counter and pouring two cups of coffee, and walking them back to the dining room table. “Would ya mind sittin’ down with me for a minute?”

Katsuki felt a momentary surge of anxiety, and he had to fight the urge to look around for an exit strategy. He was about to be threatened, wasn’t he? He breathed in.

It was okay.

It was a rite of passage, after all, being threatened by a girl’s father.

He sat down at the table, perpendicular to where Satoru was sitting.

“Gotta tell you, I wasn’t sure what to expect when Ochako told us she was datin’ someone.”

Yup, it was happening. All that was missing was the damn shotgun. Not that he needed it.

“She talks about you about as much as she talks about herself when she calls us.” He laughed quietly and shook his head. “But you know I had never made the connection that you were the foul-mouthed boy from her first year that she fought at the Sports Festival.”

He girded himself, prepared to go on the defensive. “Look,” he said. “I...I know I’m not always so nice or warm or friendly, but...”

“Bakugo,” he interrupted, setting his coffee aside and leaning forward onto his knees so that he was a little closer to him. “I don’t give two shits about that.”



Katsuki's eyes widened at that. He had always assumed that would be his undoing. From all he had ever heard, dads wanted their girls with nice boys. Polite boys. All the things he wasn't.

"Sir?"

"Look," Satoru continued, eyeing Katsuki with an intensity that definitely reminded him of Ochako. "In my experience, nice and friendly are all well and good, but at the end of the day, that ain't the most important thing to me when it comes to Ochako." Somewhere in there, Katsuki had leaned forward too; he wasn't sure why, but there was something in the way he was speaking that made Katsuki not want to miss it.

"I've come to learn that nice don't always mean *kind*, Katsuki," Satoru continued. "And polite sure as hell don't always mean *good*. And friendly *don't* always mean that you'll give whatever you can to make the other person happy. And that," he said, with a firm nod, and some kind of emotion swimming in his eyes. "That is what I want for my girl."

Satoru sighed deeply and folded his hands tight on the table, his red, swollen knuckles straining. "Bein' Ochako's daddy is the best damn thing that ever happened to me," he said.

Katsuki believed him.

"But it's also the hardest." Katsuki could see that too. He saw it the worry and adoration that crossed the man's features any time he looked at his daughter. "Even before everything that happened, it was hard. Because she loves without a damn safety net. But she doesn't really give that love back to herself when she needs to. And as hard as that was before, it was even more hellish after all she went through."

Katsuki wasn't sure if he should look away; he knew what to do when Ochako cried, but that was only because he had a shit-ton of practice. He didn't know what to do with her father's tears. It seemed invasive to look at them, but he also didn't want to leave.

He wanted to know this because it meant knowing Ochako more.

It meant understanding her in a way that he couldn't on his own.

"I wanted..." His voice strained and cracked. "I want," he amended. "I want to protect my daughter because, sometimes, it's hard to believe she'll protect herself. And dammit if it didn't rip my heart out of my

body to know that I couldn't save her when she needed me to."

Katsuki couldn't imagine. There was nothing in his brain that could let him understand just how hard that had been. The closest he could get was to imagine if something like that happened to her now- now when she was the person who had changed him in all the best possible ways.

"I couldn't save her when it happened, and I couldn't be there for her in the way that I wanted to when she got back to us, and that was... that was impossible at first. It was hell. Those...those first few months were hell."

Katsuki nodded. They had been for him too, but he dared not say that now. He knew, as much as he cared for Ochako, that it was nothing compared to what her parents had been going through. They had watched her grow. Worried over her crib, broken bones and hospital beds.

He could not fathom what they had gone through.

"There were nights where Rina would just cry and cry, and there was nothing I could do to make her feel better because..." He paused, his brows furrowing and his eyes shutting tight, seeming overwhelmed with everything he was feeling. When he started again his voice was raspy and almost too vulnerable. "Because...that was our baby and we knew she was suffering so bad."

Satoru was crying now, openly. Not violent or sobbing, but tears were falling with abandon. And Katsuki wondered if he had always been a sensitive man, or had the past year just stripped down every last reserve he had.

Katsuki could imagine either being true.

But Satoru cleared his throat and soldiered on. "And one of the only things that made Rina feel better- that made me feel better- Rina would shake her head and say, "Oh Satoru..." He looked up at Katsuki with intense, sincere eyes swimming with tears, locking him in place the same way Ochako did regularly. "...At least she's got that Katsuki boy,' she would say. "He's gonna take good care of her'."

Katsuki was not so tender or sensitive as Ochako and her father. But all the same, those words hit him like a ton of bricks to the chest, knocking the wind out of him. He had no idea what to say. None at all. Somehow that praise resonated deeper than any that he had ever

received.

“So,” continued Satoru, straightening slightly and wiping his tears away as he looked straight at Katsuki again. “When I tell you that I don’t give two licks about how well-mannered you are or about if you swear like a sailor, *that’s* what I mean.” He reached out and rested a huge hand on Katsuki’s shoulder. “Because as far as I’m concerned, you’ve already proven yourself ten times over, son. So whatever blessing I get to give in a situation like this, you should know that you have it.”

Katsuki nodded- wishing he could think of anything to say.

But he was completely overwhelmed by it all. He felt the weight and privilege of her father's words.

It humbled him in the same it did any time Ochako trusted him with some new, tender part of herself.

"And, man-to-man," continued Satoru. "I will never be able to thank you enough for all that you've done for Ochako."

He shook his head. "I...you have nothing to thank me for, Uraraka-san," he said. "She's...she's very important to me, and that means that she'll always be safe with me."

Satoru looked like he was about to say something else when a tired voice interrupted their heart-to-heart.

“Daddy,” she said, shuffling into the kitchen, still looking half asleep. “You ain’t threatin’ Katsuki, are ya?!”

Satoru’s eyes lit up at the sound of her voice, and Katsuki was sure that his did too. “Oh, you know,” said Satoru, patting Katsuki on the shoulder and throwing a wink at his daughter. “That’s a dad’s job, Ochako!” He looked at Katsuki. “Katsuki understands that, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah,” he said, with a dumb nod. “Yeah. I understand.”

He really did.

###

Ochako was doing better- there was no denying it. But it was hard to describe what better meant. She wasn’t “better,” but she also wasn’t even sure what better looked like anymore. She just knew she was

doing more now than treading water (at least on most days, though those days still came). She just knew that she was doing better, and, for the first time, she could see the difference. For so long, it had all felt so internal and marginal, the slightest of shifts that she could barely measure but that she had felt.

But she could measure so much of it now.

She could see it in the mirror- in her more rounded cheeks and the blush that was rising once again on her skin.

She could see it in the way she (for the most part) didn't shrink away from her own reflection.

She could feel it in the way she moved naturally, once again, to show affection in the way she did before. She hugged and linked arms with the people she trusted. She didn't assume that a stranger on the street was a villain- her hypervigilance only reared its head on bad days where sleep was plagued with nightmares, or she caught a smell that reminded her of a certain cologne or shampoo that had followed her into those hotel rooms.

She could see it in the way that she didn't shrink away or feel any anxiety when she met Katsuki's parents. There was once a time when she would have called herself a people person. She made a great first impression.

And unlike Katsuki- she didn't mind small talk.

She liked big talk too, but also, small talk wasn't the egregious chore for her that it was for Katsuki.

Which was good because while she and Katsuki would only be at a beach house with Katsuki's parents, apparently every single relative on Mitsuki's side were staying somewhere on this beach with them. So...she had to make a lot of small talk.

Like a lot.

As Mitsuki's five sisters, not to mention a whole mess of cousins, ranging from older than Katsuki to 5-years-old.

And all of them were excited to meet the first girl that Katsuki had ever brought home.

She had sat around the loud table and made conversation.

She had participated in a game night (even when Katsuki had opted to sit out despite his mother's prodding and screaming at him).

The first afternoon and night had gone by without a hitch. She had gone to bed feeling great, feeling like herself. Which was happening more and more often.

In many ways, she was doing better, but still, sometimes, she was taken by surprise, by both the good and the bad. There had been times she had felt a swelling of pride when she had been certain that something would bring her to her knees, and there had been times she had the wind knocked out of her by how unprepared she certain things that hurt her.

And in those moments, she had felt devastated and sad and embarrassed.

And so very disappointed.

Like she had just taken a million steps back.

Dr. Shoko had given her tools to deal with that- not to spiral into self-loathing when she perceived a set-back, but it was still so hard; like someone dangling a carrot in front of her and then cruelly snatching it away just to laugh.

Which was exactly how she felt now, sunk onto the floor in her room in the beach house, sobbing herself sick. She had tried on the bathing suit a million times over her week at home. It was cute, probably one of the cuter suits she had ever owned- vintage and polka-dotted. It was modest to her liking, as far as bathing suits went, but, as soon as she put it on in this room- in this new place- knowing she was about to have to step outside in it- her self-scrutiny cranked up to a million.

And no matter what she told herself- no matter how she assured herself that she was safe, that she was fine, that she wasn't going alone, and that the beach would be filled with people and no one would be looking at her- it didn't work.

She could put on clothes- she supposed- normal clothes. But then she would be Katsuki's freak girlfriend with a sun allergy or something like that. And she wasn't sure what was worse; both made her feel like shit.

Both made her feel like she wasn't herself.

Both made her feel like she wasn't in control of what was happening in and around her.

A gentle knock on her door made her jump to her feet suddenly.

"Yeah, I'm-I'm sorry..." she knew she was probably holding them up. She leaned against the dresser and patted at her face with a tissue, trying desperately to get the splotches to go away, but as soon as she did, she broke out into tears again. "I-I'm almost ready..."

"Ochako..." it was Mitsuki on the other side of the door, her voice calmer than she had heard it on this trip. "Can I come in?"

Ochako breathed out and dropped her head, her tears splattering on the wood of the dresser. "Y-yeah," she called. "It's unlocked."

The nob turned slowly, and Mitsuki stepped inside and gently closed it behind her. Ochako didn't dare look up at the woman- she was too embarrassed.

"Maybe you all should go on ahead of me," she said, wiping at her eyes hurriedly. "I-I'm not feeling great."

Mitsuki didn't say anything for a moment, but Ochako could hear her moving closer. Ochako looked up briefly and saw Mitsuki in the reflection behind her, already in her swimwear. She looked good, beautiful, and confident. Mitsuki was all of those things, and Ochako couldn't help but feel a little intimidated (if not envious) of the woman. She wasn't a hero, but still, she entered a room like she wasn't afraid of a damn thing in it. Ochako couldn't help but admire that.

Ochako breathed out slowly and turned to look at her. And Ochako saw her red eyes, shining with understanding and empathy.

"Is there something I can do to help?" It was all she asked.

Katsuki complained all the time about how nosy his mom was, but it seemed she knew when to reel it in when she needed to.

"I'm sorry," she said in response. It was all that she knew to say.

"Do you want me to go get Katsuki?"

"Oh god no," Ochako said, shaking her head and moving to wipe her tears away. "No! I- I don't want to ruin his day. Or yours," she said, looking at her apologetically.

Mitsuki scoffed, though not unkindly. "You could never ruin that brat's day. And you don't need to apologize."

"I've...I've been doing better. I have," she said, the ring of apology still in her voice because she couldn't quite stomp it out. "I really have."

"Oh, Ochako..." Mitsuki called her that a lot- she didn't call her sweetie or sweetheart, and while those names no longer triggered a visceral response in her, she really appreciated that Mitsuki wasn't using them. "You don't have to worry about us. You don't have to explain yourself to us, okay?"

"Katsuki warned you that I was crazy, huh?" she asked with a shaky laugh, trying to lighten the mood just a little, but Mitsuki was still looking at her with the same intense look.

"No," she said seriously, shaking her head. "Not at all. Katsuki is a little shit sometimes, but that boy has more good things to say about you than I have ever heard him say about anyone. He thinks the world of you, Ochako, so don't worry about that. And if you want to stay here and not go down to the beach, then, well, the little shit may just propose to you right here for saving him."

Ochako smiled weakly at her, finally getting her breathing to level out. "I like the beach," she said. "I do...I used to love it. But I...I have a weird clothes thing." It was all she offered. But Mitsuki nodded like she understood. "I looked at a million different bathing suits to pick one that I liked and that I...that I thought Katsuki would like." She could hear the sadness once again cracking through her voice at that small confession.

"It's really cute," said Mitsuki. "The cut is very flattering, and those are definitely your colors."

Ochako looked down at herself. She had come so far in starting to appreciate her body again, closing the gap and disconnect. She had looked cute in it. She was feeling prettier and cuter more often now. Some of that did have to do with Katsuki; it was hard to feel anything but that when Katsuki looked at her the way he did (honestly, the way he looked at her made her feel a little different than *just* cute or pretty, but it wasn't something that she had the strength to name, but it was definitely something she enjoyed). But it was more than just Katsuki- she had come a long way because she had busted her ass to do just that.

To start to love and care for herself again.

“It’s just...I put it on and freaked out a little. And I don’t want to be the weirdo who wears street clothes at the beach.”

“Well,” said Mitsuki, somehow sounding exactly like Katsuki in that minute. “First off, you can wear whatever the fuck you want to wear to the beach, and if anyone looks at you sideways, they’ll have to deal with me, and I’m ten times scarier than Katsuki.” Ochako laughed breathily at that, feeling just a little bit better. “Also,” added Mitsuki. “Masaru makes these gorgeous bathing suit wraps, and I can’t go anywhere without three suitcases worth of options, so...”

“Oh no,” said Ochako, gesturing back and forth and shaking her head. “No...I’m so sorry! Really, I’m okay. I don’t need...”

“I know you don’t,” said Mitsuki. “Buuut, it wouldn’t hurt to come and look. I have a couple that would look really great with that suit.”

Ochako let her hands fall to her sides, fighting the urge to move to cover herself up again. It would be something easy, something that didn’t look out of place, something she could use to cover or uncover if she felt comfortable enough. She finally nodded, and Mitsuki gestured for her to follow her out of the room and toward Mitsuki’s.

Ochako quickly found herself unclenching as Mitsuki showed her a few of the different options. But, more than the wraps, it was the company she found the most soothing. Mitsuki was explosive and loud and brash and crass, and she had seen that on this trip. But she liked it in that same way Katsuki’s outburst used to make her laugh. But as she dabbed a cooling salve on Ochako’s cheeks, as she helped her sift through the beautiful, soft fabric in her suitcase for a wrap that would make Ochako feel good and also not make her stand out like a sore thumb on the beach, Ochako felt a calming warmth settle inside of her. Cozy and comforting.

And that feeling continued when she saw Katsuki. She was very aware of the fact that not only was she more exposed than usual, but that this was the least amount of clothes she had ever worn in front of Katsuki.

And for some reason- even with his mother right beside her- that made a blush bloom across her neck and chest- and that only intensified when she caught the change in Katsuki’s expression when he saw her, the momentary flash of something in his eyes that made her knees go a little weak (or a lot weak).



And that feeling came washing over her again, not so unpleasant, that...that...particular way that Katsuki made her feel in her whole body that somehow "cute" and "pretty" didn't quite cover. He didn't say anything other than to ask her if she was ready to go.

And it turned out Mitsuki was right. No one looked sideways at her- of course, that didn't mean people didn't look at them, but she was pretty sure that was because Mitsuki and Bakugo were both hard not to notice, either because they were ridiculously beautiful or because they were loud.

Or maybe both.

And slowly, Ochako's worries and tension and self-scrutiny unraveled, replaced by the kiss of the sun on her skin, the smell and taste of salt in the air, and the cold crash and pull of the waves. She felt all of it- every last bit of it.

And playing in the sand with two of Katsuki's cousins and a couple of random kids who had made their way over to add onto their giant sandcastle, her feet tucked deep into the warm, soft sand, she felt a deep comfort spreading through her.

Starting in her chest, moving down her arms and legs, and to the tips of her fingers and toes.

It wasn't that "everything would be okay."

She knew too much, had seen and been through too much to know she can never, with confidence, say that. At least not right now. But still, she felt better than fine. Better than okay...right now.

A feeling of deeply enjoying herself.

A feeling of deep contentment.

###

Things were complicated with Ochako, and that was just something that Katsuki accepted. He knew things wouldn't be as easy or simple or direct for the two of them in the way they might be for other couples. There was more to weigh and a hell of a lot more to consider.

And so much was still so loaded for her.

There were so many things that Katsuki knew and understood and

maneuvered so well when it came to Ochako. But when it came to himself, to his normal teenage boy proclivities, those were a little harder for him to manage. He knew there was a part of her that wanted that validation, a part of her that wanted to know that he liked everything about her, that he was attracted to her.

And, for the most part, he could respond to that without a feeling of uncertainty or anxiety creeping up in his chest.

...But he didn't know how to act when the most pressing thing she was to him in a moment was hot...when she was sexy.

When he found his eyes lingering on her bottom lip, or on the flush on her neck after he gave her a long, hard kiss, or on the feel of her body on his when she pinned him in a spar. All things he knew weren't inherently bad.

He *knew* she wasn't a desireless person. Obviously, that was a part of what started this whole thing, her exploring of herself, her sexuality, and the things she wanted. And he certainly did not see her as a sexless being; that was now abundantly clear to him from the way she kissed him, held him, and, now more recently, those gorgeous little noises she had just gotten brave enough to make when he was kissing her. And not to mention, she did her fair share of stealing not-so-sneaky looks at him when he was stretching, or his shirt was off, or even in class after a particularly impressive display of his awesomeness.

And so what if that made him want to show off just a little sometimes.

But still, Katsuki, sometimes, second-guessed himself more than he normally would, sometimes unsure of how to merge boyfriend-Katsuki and friend-confidant-advocate Katsuki, sometimes both duking it out in his own consciousness.

And when he had heard her and his mother talking and laughing, and he looked up from his cellphone as they joined Katsuki and his dad in the living room of the beach house...well, boyfriend Katsuki didn't want to look away.

Boyfriend Katsuki had a little bit of a brain-meltdown at the sight of her in a bathing suit.

Boyfriend Katsuki had never seen that much of her skin before.

Boyfriend Katsuki had never gotten to see so much of how far she has come, the full evidence of just how hard she had worked to get stronger, and faster, and healthier over the last 8 months. Of course, he had noticed; he handled her on the regular when they were sparring and had gotten front-row seats to her growing physical strength. But she was still very modest for the most part in what she chose to wear, so he usually didn't get such a good view of the way her legs were starting to fill out again, the curve of her thighs and her defined calves.

So, boyfriend-Katsuki was trying his best not to gape at her like an idiot to drink in every last inch of her, while the other Katsuk knew full well that he would punch anyone else for looking at her the way that he was.

But, he supposed he had to remind himself of the epic, badass speech she gave to her friends the day they had dared to underestimate her ability to make her own choices. She wasn't a child; she could make decisions, and so far, it only seemed to make her happy (maybe blush a bit) when she caught him eyeing her.

The difference between him and every other damn extra out there was that she *wanted* him to look at her like that.

And he knew that made a hell of a lot of difference.

But still, his own internal conflict over it all was something he was learning to manage. Something that he expected might be a part of their relationship for a while- like so many things- that was just a little bit less clear and obvious.

He clicked off his phone and stood to face her. Settling for a, "you ready, Cheeks?" Because even if he was sure he could tell her how hot she was without sounding like a creep, he would rather not do it in front of his parents. But, generally, she was pretty good about reading him, and the way she blushed under his smirk and lingering stare told him that his message wasn't missed as he held out his hand to her.

...Because he could.

And she took it without hesitation.

...Because she could.

They were at the beach all of five minutes before his obnoxious little cousins had dragged her away from her towel to come help them

build a castle in the wet sand, and apparently, she didn't even think to grab the wrap that she had worn down to the beach.

Katsuki, for his part, settled into one of the lounge chairs. The younger ones knew better than to try and convince Katsuki this early in the day. He needed his beach nap before he could handle those brats. Katsuki sometimes felt like certain people in his family didn't know that the purpose of a vacation was to relax.

Not to run yourself ragged from sunrise to sundown.

He did that every day, for fuck's sake.

Though eventually, they would come back around and poke at his feet and see how much sand they could put on him before he exploded himself at them, snarling and snapping, and they ran around like headless chickens shouting, "Sandmonster! Sandmonster! Sadmonster!" at the top of their lungs.

*Brats .*

But right now, he was busy taking his beach nap. It was the perfect time for it. Ochako was currently lying down in the sand while the kids packed wet sand around her legs and shaped it into a mermaid tail or some shit like that.

If they were creative and knew her at-fucking-all, they would make her a Kraken. But he supposed it didn't really matter, he could hear her laughing from where he was lounging in his chair, and that was all he cared about. That, along with the crash of the waves, were about a second away from lulling him into sleep when his father's voice broke through, jerking him cruelly from the edge.

Traitor.

They were supposed to be beach napping- his dad was the only one he could count on to talk sense into the old hag who would heave everyone out of bed at 6 am because "you don't want to waste an hour of vacation."

"She seems to be doing well..." he said it casually, light, letting his son know that he wasn't prying or trying to dig into his or Ochako's personal business. Not that Katsuki typically had to worry about that from his dad; his mom was the one who was always sticking her nose where it didn't belong. But in some ways, that made Masaru a much more competent spy than Mitsuki.

Katsuki continued to lay still, his eyes closed behind his sunglasses, for a moment considering whether or not to pretend to be asleep, but then opted for a non-committal grunt and a head nod.

“I honestly wasn’t sure what to expect,” his dad continued, undeterred by Katsuki’s silence. Katsuki opened his eyes at a squint and shifted his gaze to his dad, lounging in the chair beside him.

“What the fuck does that mean?” he grumbled, not particularly frustrated. But the truth was, even now, he hated talking about Ochako to anyone who wasn’t Ochako. Bragging about her, hyping her, telling people to back-off, threatening people for her, all things he was more than capable of. But talking *about* her always made him feel just a little uneasy.

But he knew his dad wasn’t trying to gossip with him like some high schooler. In fact, they had always been incredibly respectful of his privacy- very rarely pushing, and when they did, even Katsuki had to admit it was for his own good.

Of course, his parents had, like everyone else even remotely affiliated with UA, heard when Ochako had been kidnapped. And they had inquired more than once about her while she was missing and after she had come back.

Katsuki had kept how close they were getting out of any of his conversations with his parents until he had called his mother, a little panicked and afraid during a particularly bad week where Ochako couldn’t seem to manage any sleep without nightmares and cried more than she did anything else. He had been completely lost about how to help her.

So he called his mom.

And her advice had been good.

*“There’s nothing you can do to make it go away for her, Kats. You can just let her know her feelings aren’t a burden to you...and make sure she has some lavender tea and warm socks.”*

“Nothing,” his dad continued with a shrug. “Just that she must be incredibly strong.”

“She is.”

Masaru hummed thoughtfully like he wanted to say more but was

choosing not to. Katsuki hated when he did that, it was more annoying than his mother's blatant butting-in.

“Got something to say, old man?”

Masaru chuckled softly and shook his head. “Nothing particular,” he said. “Just that you’re mother and I are really proud of me.”

He bristled as he shot up on his chair and took his glasses off so he could glare at his dad. “And what the hell is that supposed to mean?” This time he asked the question with a little bit more defensiveness.

“Nothing,” Masaru said, in his practiced tone of de-escalation. “Just that...”

“Because she ain’t a chore,” he bit out angrily. “Or a charity case or someone I deserve praise for being with. You don’t have to be *proud* of me for loving her. It's not fucking hard. If anything, I’m the fucking handful between the two of us, so...”

“Oh, I *know* that son, trust me,” said Masaru, with a gentle laugh, sinking back into his chair, his face turning up toward the sun. Katsuki hoped for a moment that conversation was over, although he was certain he was worked up now beyond the reach of his beach nap. *Dammit* ! “So,” said Masaru slowly, and Katsuki braced himself for whatever his dad was going to say. “You love her?”

He wondered how his father expected him to react to that.

Explode?

Scream?

Sputter like an idiot?

But Katsuki just sunk back down into his chair and crossed his arms behind his head. “Tch...none of your business.”

But Katsuki knew he had already admitted it, so there was no reason to deny it, or even to explain. Because he wasn’t even sure how to explain to *himself* that he loved her and had loved her for a long time, but some of that had nothing to do with the fact that she held his hand and let him kiss her.

If anything, those were happening *because* he had loved her before then and because she loved him.

Like so many things, boyfriend Katsuki wasn't sure if he was in love with her (though he was well on his way), but friend-advocate-protector-confidant Katsuki had loved her for a while now. And he wasn't sure if they were different kinds of love.

Or if, at the end of the day, they were made of the same stuff.

Care.

Vulnerability.

Complete trust.

Mutual respect and admiration.

A willingness to destroy cities and commit murder for the other...

Normal shit like that.

So the answer to his dad's prying question wasn't necessarily a simple question. But it wasn't a hard one either.

And he reckoned that Masaru already knew the answer to it anyway.

###

"Owe!" Ochako bit back the laugh. "Owe! Owe! Owe!"

"Hey, don't whine at me, Lord Explosion Dynamight," she said, but she couldn't keep the amusement out of her voice. He growled into the pillow he was lying face-down against on his bed. "I told you to reapply lotion every hour," she tsked.

"I DID!"

"Clearly not enough," she muttered, squeezing a little more aloe vera into her palm and moving her hand in gentle circles over Katsuki's shoulder blades and into the red, angry skin that spanned across his whole damn torso. "I didn't even know you could burn," she said, scooting down the mattress on her knees so she could spread the soothing balm down his back.

"Why the fuck wouldn't I burn?" he asked, turning to look over his shoulder at her. "I'm not a monster!"

She giggled slightly at the offense in his voice. "Because you have trained by submerging your hands in boiling water!"

“What does that have to do with sunburn, idiot?”

“Don’t call me an idiot,” she said. “I’m the one doctoring your poor, tender baby skin so you don’t get any blisters!”

He scoffed and buried his face back in the pillow, leaving just enough space, so his words were unruffled. “I said you could go with the stupid family to dinner!”

She giggled and leaned forward, tilting her head so she could get a glimpse of his eye before he turned away, pouting, to hide his face in the pillow. “And leave my poor, suffering boyfriend alone?! What kind of impression would that be?”

“You shoulda gone, Cheeks,” he said, his voice dramatically forlorn. “Leave me to my shame.”

She rolled her eyes. “You are so dramatic, Katsuki. Besides...” she squeezed a bit more. “Besides...” her fingers worked carefully down his spine and to dip of his lower back, her eyes scanning appreciatively over the dips and valleys cut by his shoulders and the defined muscles of his back. She had seen him shirtless several times, but not this close, and never with the opportunity for prolonged touching. “This isn’t so bad.”

He didn’t respond to that, and Ochako was sure something shifted in his demeanor as her hands tentatively, carefully, if a little exploratory, applied the salve to his lower back, her mouth suddenly feeling a little dry and her own skin feeling warm.

Even though- unlike Katsuki- she had diligently reapplied her sunblock.

She felt him shift slightly to look over his shoulder at her, drawing her attention to the fact that her hand had stopped moving and now was awkwardly resting on his lower back, her fingers curiously tracing the scars, the skin, the defined dips of the muscles that made him so scarily powerful. If he thought it was weird, he didn’t say anything. If anything, he let out a relaxed sigh as he dropped back down into the pillow.

After setting the aloe aside and wiping her hands on a discarded towel, Katsuki still hadn’t moved from his position. And even now, pouting into a pillow about his beet-red skin, his hair wet and puffy from his shower, she couldn’t seem to take her eyes off of him.



He was just...

So damn beautiful.

Everything about him. She brushed her fingers carefully over his shoulders and arms and up to the back of his neck, where she took a lock of his blonde hair and rubbed it between her thumb and her forefinger.

There was no more aloe vera to rub in, and he knew that too, but, still, she wasn't quite ready to pull away- to stop touching him.

"Does this hurt your burn?" she asked, her voice soft and quiet.

He shook his head. "No..." but there was a slight hitch in his voice. She brushed the tips of her fingers over the top of his spine and coaxed a delightful shiver from him that made her feel just a little giddy.

And, apparently, the sun had fried her brain and had made her either bold or stupid, because before she could overthink it, she was leaning over him, her mouth close to his ear. "Can I kiss you, Katsuki?"

It wasn't such a formal thing between them anymore- and by now, not every kiss needed to be asked for between the two of them, but it was almost a phrase of affection, something that made her smile and him smirk. An assurance that they wanted each other. But before he could turn to look over his shoulder to do just that, her mouth landed, chaste and sweet against the side of his neck, just below his ear. She felt him tense slightly, and she pulled away quickly and sat back up, looking him over.

Usually, she would find a blush on the back of his neck and his ears, but they were already burnt, so it was hard to tell.

She waited, holding her breathe, feeling nervous and excited, and so many things that she didn't even have words for right now. But it was making her feel a little hot and a little bit breathless.

"Do it again..."

It was a murmured request, one she was barely able to make out against the pillow, but it was clear enough, and she was more than happy to oblige. She leaned in again, this time kissing against his shoulder, lingering just a few seconds longer on his warm, salty skin.

Then another at the top of his spine.

Then another on the back of his neck.

And even with his face in the pillow, she could hear the sharp inhale of air as her lips brushed against him, and it made her feel just a little bit bolder as she lowered herself down beside him.

“How’s the pain?” she asked, her fingers teasing up and down his back, careful to keep her touches light against his sun-damaged skin.

“S’fine,” he murmured, turning to look at her face as she laid down on her side, resting her head on the pillow next to him. He didn’t look like he was in any pain right now. She maneuvered herself until his arm was draped over her shoulder, and she could tuck herself in closer beside him.

This time, she went for a kiss on his cheek, but when he shifted his face out of the pillow, the kiss was caught by the corner of his mouth. He pressed the palm of his hand into her back and tugged her closer to him onto the pillow, this time finding her lips with clear intent and purpose.

The kisses were soft and languid and thorough, and she found herself overwhelmed in the best possible way by the taste of him.

It felt just a little different, and Ochako was starting to feel a bit light-headed, the grip of her fingers in his hair just a little more needy. She felt his hand moving down her sides and over her hips, only to start to retreat back up immediately to the safety zone of her waist as if he had momentarily lost himself right along with her. She wondered where he had wanted to go with them. She knew they weren’t in a place where she was comfortable losing clothes, but she wanted him to know he didn’t have to keep his hands on her back forever. If he didn’t want to.

She felt him move to pull away, no doubt to check on her, to make sure he hadn’t messed up. But she grabbed his wrist gently, holding his hand where it was.

“I’m good, Katsuki,” she whispered assuringly against the corner of his mouth. “I promise. You can...”

Wait.

Not *you can*.

That wasn't what he wanted to hear.

She *wanted* .

"I want you to touch me," she said, her voice shaking. "I like it when you touch me."

She guided his willing hand back down to her hips as she scooted closer and draped her leg over his, hooking her heel into the back of his thigh as she leaned back in again for another enthusiastic kiss.

While Katsuki had been more than clear that she had full control when it came to stuff like this, he still very much took the lead after she gave the go-ahead. She just had not had the confidence for it. And she wasn't sure what it was, growing trust, continued healing, the regular and natural progression of getting closer to Katsuki, or maybe it was just getting up close and personal with his shirtless back- but either way, she was kissing him like a starving woman- which, in some way, in this way, this way of safe and trusting intimacy, she supposed she was starving.

Her brain and her body and her soul had stored up all of those moments of hands and lips and bodies on her. And all of that had just outweighed every other experience, in both sheer number and power.

Until now.

Now, like on the beach, in the sand, under the sun, her body was giving itself over to the deep desire of wanting and being wanted.

To the feel of his hand under her thigh, moving up and down, fingers pressing into her, his grip a little more insistent than it had ever been, keeping her leg hoisted over his waist (as if it was going anywhere); to the way the sounds he made when she caught his bottom lip between hers almost made her smile because it was so damn cute and hot at the same time.

All of it outweighed everything else right now.

His teeth scraped gently over her bottom lip, and his kisses moved from her lips to over her jaw and against her throat. She tilted her head back in response, both telling him he was okay with it and that she wanted more. The sensation of his lips and his panting breath over the pulse in her neck caused her to momentarily forget herself, and before she could stop it, her fingers curled into his back as if keeping herself from floating away.

He let out a hiss of pain as her fingernails dug into his burned skin.

She let out a yelp and pulled away.

“Oh, god,” she said, letting out a breathless giggle over his lips and pressed her forehead to his. “S-sorry,” she said, rubbing her hands soothingly up and down his arms in apology. “I forgot about your poor, burned skin.”

He scoffed and nuzzled into her neck. “It’s fine,” he said, voice a little gravelly and a lot breathless. Her hands went up to his hair again, and she brushed her fingers through it in soft, soothing motions. Neither spoke for a moment, but then he gave her leg a little squeeze and murmured into her neck, “You okay?”

She sighed happily and pressed her cheek into the crown of his head as she held him close. “Absolutely,” she said. “I...I feel really good,” she confessed, glad that his face was hidden and he couldn’t see her. “Are you...are you good?”

He nodded lazily.

“Fuck yeah...”

“Good,” she said, continuing to drag her finger pads across his scalp, still feeling a little guilty for injuring him.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

She was.

But she was so warm and cozy, and she liked how tightly he was holding her and the feel of his breath on her throat as he made himself comfortable.

“Yeah,” she sighed reluctantly, but she didn’t stop the movement of her hands in his hair, and he didn’t loosen his hold on her.

They would get around to it eventually.

But right now, she knew what she wanted.

And she wanted to stay like this- just for a bit longer.

Just five more minutes.

## Chapter End Notes

A trigger warning for next chapter:

The next couple of chapters will be centered around the trial for those who had been a part of what happened to Ochako and the others. While, like I said over and over, much of this fic wish fulfillment so everyone shows up in ways that don't always reflect the reality, I still want to show the reality.

Ochako will have very strong feelings and conflict and pain around the trial, but also she will be supported in a way that simply is not true of all of victims, and that is terribly sad.

All that to say, because a criminal trial may be uniquely traumatizing for people, I just wanted to give a heads up.

Thank you all for reading, for your continuous support and encouragement, and for motivating me to continue with this story!

# Not Square One

## Chapter Summary

“And now, it’s like picking open a fresh wound and...” she let out a shaky breath. “I feel like if I bleed anymore, I’m gonna die.”

“You won’t,” he said. He wasn’t sure if that was the right thing to say, but he had to tell her that- he had to remind her that, even if she felt like she was drowning, that she wasn’t. She has a pulse, even when she can’t feel it.

“You won’t,” he repeated. “If this is what you’ve decided to do, then you’re gonna take every last one of those fuckers down.”

When Ochako woke up on September 5th at 6 am, she had been ready for the worst- for a deep, twisting panic in her gut that made her ache in her body and soul.

She had even been prepared for it. She didn’t normally have therapy on Monday, but she had rescheduled for the week to make sure that she saw Dr. Shoko today. Ryuko knew enough about Ochako and enough about her situation that her boss took her seriously when she asked if she could switch work-study days this week to assure that she had that space open for Dr. Shoko.

Ryuko had been more than supportive.

And her friends...well, her friends were being a little more supportive than she needed- all as keenly aware of the date as she was. She was coming to realize that, in their own way, they had been traumatized too. She knew it wasn’t quite the same; the closest comparable feeling was how she felt when she lost Li.

He was there, and then he wasn’t.

She had been there- they had just finished a week together at their training camp. She had just spent a week bunking, eating, training, and surviving with them after a year of near-death experiences together.

She was there, and then she wasn’t.

She knew it had been deeply hard on many of them.

And while none of them said that, probably out of respect for her own trauma, she could still tell. They had, for the most part, all of them, gotten to a place of normalcy, found an equilibrium that made space for who she was now and still allowed her to feel normal.

Like she belonged as she was.

But the last couple of days had been different. That hard-fought-for equilibrium was just a little bit off. Not in any obvious way, not in any clear way she could name. But just the general mood felt weighted and sluggish and coiled- like something was hanging over their heads. There was once a time when she would have felt guilty about being the cause. But, as Dr. Shoko told her, over and over again, it wasn't her prerogative to tell them how to feel or what they should feel. If that was how they felt, then they were entitled to that in the same way that she was; and it wasn't anyone's fault.

Katsuki seemed torn between not wanting to make a big deal out of it but also clucking around her like a damn mother hen- a proclivity he had, historically, been fairly good at keeping in check.

"I'm okay," she had told him the night before when he was being a little more snuggly than usual (well, she let him think that, but the truth was as soon as he decided he liked it, she had been surprised by how much he seemed to want to be close to her, and hold her, and cuddle her, even if he never would have called it that). But Ochako-historically- had always been a physically affectionate person, so she wasn't going to complain when he grabbed her ankles and tugged her legs over his lap whenever he felt like there was too much distance between the two of them.

She had told him, "I'm okay," but she wasn't sure. She just didn't know for sure.

"I know," he had said, burying his face into her hair.

She laughed and tilted her head up from the screen of his laptop and kissed his chin. "You're being kinda cuddly," she said, wrapping her arms around his neck to let him know she didn't care.

"Tch...no, I'm not," he said. But one hand was digging hard into her leg, and the other was fisting into her shirt like he was afraid she was going somewhere. And even though she didn't have any delusions about their closeness before she had been taken, she realized that they had never talked about what that had been like.

For him.

And from the way he was holding onto her now, she couldn't help but wonder if maybe not all of his feelings right now only had to do with her emotional state.

"Were you worried about me?" she asked.

"Huh?"

She reached down and hit the spacebar on his computer and looked up at him. "When I was gone," she said, keeping her tone neutral. She didn't want him to think she would be mad either way about the answer. "What was that like for you?"

His expression turned a little irritated, though she was sure not at her; it was just how his whole face responded when he had to delve beyond surface emotions.

"Why?"

She shrugged. "I'm just curious," she said. "I just...a year ago I went to sleep in one of those nasty, hard bunks at that training camp we were at, but I still slept like a log because we had been training for 15 hours every day. And when I woke up, I thought it would be a normal day." She fiddled mindlessly with the string of his hoodie. "And then...it wasn't. But... I guess I never really thought about what it was like here." She looked up at him again, tentative and careful with her next words. "When you...when you went missing, it was like this feeling of everything just being unsafe. When Aizawa told us that they were after you, it was...I was worried, and when they took you, it was like this disbelief." His eyes were moving across her face as if trying to guess where she was going, what her point was. But even she wasn't sure, to be honest.

"I know we weren't close then," she said. "But...but I respected you a lot and the fact that villains could get you meant that none of us were safe." He flinched slightly when she reached up to touch his face, but when she moved to retract her hand, reading that as him not wanting to be touched, he reached up and grabbed her wrist, holding it against his cheek. She brushed her thumb over his cheekbone, and unexpectedly tears sprung to her eyes as a surprising guilt twisted in her chest. "I...I'm sorry I didn't come for you then," she confessed in a hushed tone.

That had not been where she had intended this conversation to go.



She hadn't thought about that choice in a long time- not out of shame or denial- it was just a lifetime ago.

"Ochako," he said, she could hear the reprimand in his voice- telling her she didn't need to feel bad about that, but she shook her head and moved the hand on his cheek to cover his mouth, his eyes narrowed, slightly annoyed, but he didn't interrupt her.

"You know that I would come for you now, right?" she said, suddenly struck with unexpected urgency. "There's nowhere I wouldn't go if you needed me."

The laser-focus of his ruby-red eyes moved between her softer brown ones. "I know that," he said intently. "Of course I know that."

Of course he did.

He knew her. Knew who she was, maybe better than anyone.

"Good," she whispered, breathing out a sigh of relief, letting go of something she hadn't even known she was holding onto. She turned her torso away from him and reached out toward his laptop.

"The place felt wrong..." he growled suddenly, his voice low in that way he would do when he was trying to guard whatever he was feeling- but it always made his voice sound that much more vulnerable.

"What?" she asked, pausing her movement to turn on the video she had stopped, reckoning that Katsuki likely had enough small talk at that point. "What do..."

"When you were...when you were gone..." he was looking down, not looking at her as he spoke. Right. She had forgotten why she had started talking about this in the first place. "I was angry at a lot of people. At Deku. At Aizawa. At the pros because..." his palm moved up and down her leg, and she wasn't sure if it was meant to be soothing for her or for him- maybe both. "I didn't understand why it was taking so long. They found my sorry ass after a few days, and I...I didn't understand how after weeks, they still didn't know where you were. I was pissed that no one had a plan."

"I was a needle in a haystack," she said, her voice soft.

He scoffed, angry and bitter, and Ochako couldn't help but wonder if maybe he was holding on to feelings too. Feelings that she never

thought to ask him about. For so long, it had been about her. Because, well, it had to be about her. But now, she had space and capacity to truly live into how she felt, how she loved.

"I don't fucking care," he growled, dropping his forehead, so it was pressed to her. "They should have looked harder. I..." he bit off the sentence aggressively. "I should have been out there looking too. I should have been doin' something."

She knew it was his emotions talking now.

There was literally nothing he could have done.

But she didn't tell him that. She had harbored so much anger and resentment too. Aizawa had been the most convenient focus of her wrath, but she had been mad at so many people, so she wouldn't try and talk Katsuki out of any of his feelings. No matter how much she wanted to tell him that there was nothing he could have done.

A lot of people had failed.

But he wasn't one of them.

"But you knew I'd come back, though," she offered softly. It was the only thing he could have given her, and it was the thing he had given her.

He grabbed her hand and brought her palm back to his mouth, this time pressing a kiss to it. "You know I'd come for you too, right? No matter where the fuck you were, I would come for you."

She nodded. "I do," she said. "I do know that."

More than she knew anything else. She knew that.

And that... *THAT* ...was the thought she took with her to bed last night. Her head was not filled with thoughts about what happened a year ago; about the last morning that she would have as that version of herself.

She had mourned that so deeply already. She had gone through that particular storm, and now, it felt like a light drizzle.

She went to bed knowing that she was a different person now- for better and worse.

And she went to bed knowing that no matter what happened now,

Katsuki was in her corner.

So maybe that was why there were no nightmares.

She hadn't woken up in a heaving, gasping fit. She hadn't spent the night tossing and turning. She hadn't woken up with a sick feeling in her stomach. It wasn't the anniversary of the shittiest day of her life.

It was a day...a day like any other.

And she got ready and went to class and had breakfast with her friends. And they took their cues from her. And when her cue was that the day was fine, that she wasn't riddled with anxiety, they met her where she was at.

Treating it like any other day.

Which in itself made her wonder if something was wrong.

"Why do you think there's something wrong with that?" asked Dr. Shoko when Ochako came to her office.

"Because it's...it's supposed to be a big deal, isn't it? Anniversaries are a big deal!"

Shoko let out a good-natured laugh. "I mean...if that's what you want to call it."

She shrugged. "What else would you call it?"

"Are you going to have an anniversary for the day you saved yourself?" She shrugged. She hadn't really thought about that- it seemed kinda self-congratulatory to her. They already threw her a welcome home party, after all. "Look," said Shoko. "If it's meaningful and helpful for you to mark the day, then you should; a lot of people do find gestures like that meaningful. But, for you, it sounds like it was just a normal day."

Ochako nodded. "That's how it felt the whole day, and I kept trying to check in with myself and make sure that I wasn't hiding anything or pushing anything back, but honestly, it just felt like a Monday."

"Then let that be true," said Shoko. "It would have been fine if today was just a day where you couldn't even get out of bed. That would have been completely valid. But you also don't need to talk yourself into manufacturing feelings that aren't there."

Ochako nodded. "Okay," she said. "That's helpful." She looked up at Shoko. "What does this mean?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, should I...should I stop therapy if I'm doing so well?"

Shoko leaned back into her chair, looking at Ochako in that way that was completely open but also giving away nothing- it was so frustrating. "Do you want to?"

Ochako bit her lip anxiously and rubbed at her knees. She didn't want to seem weak. She was doing so well. Shouldn't that mean that she was done? But still...

"I...I don't feel like I'm done," she said softly. "Is...what does that mean?"

"It means," said Shoko. "That you are listening to what you need. Sadly, most people mistake "feeling better" with being done, but really, learning maintenance is just as important as getting through the trauma. There may come a time when you feel like you can or should scale back and move to once a month, and there may come a time when you feel like a specialized trauma counselor may not be what you need anymore."

Ochako couldn't believe she was even talking about that.

There was once a time when she was so angry at having to sit in this chair once a week- and now she couldn't imagine not doing it.

She felt, deep in her heart, that she wasn't done here. That she wasn't where she needed to be. She once thought that this time took away from her strength and took away from her opportunity to become a better hero.

But now she knew the truth.

She was a better hero, a better person, because of her time here.

And she knew she still had more to grow.

###

Ochako knew something was wrong as soon as she stepped into Nezu's office. She was already irritated that she was going to be late for her work-study. She was supposed to go patrol with one of the sidekicks

tonight. But Aizawa had assured her that they had already contacted Ryuku's agency. Which only made her more panicked.

Which meant that likely, she wasn't going to make it at all today.

She was two months into the work-study, and it was already a world of difference between this and her internship. Her boots were on the ground; she was in the room with Ryuko when she got assignments and was seeing more and more what it meant to be a hero in the world. She was- honestly- flourishing there.

So the fact that it was interrupted by a call to Nezu's office was irritating as hell, and that irritation mixed with dread when she got to his office to find not only Aizawa and Nezu but also Detective Tsukauchi and several other men in ties who she did not recognize.

"What's uh...what's going on?" she asked.

"Uraraka," said Aizawa. "Why don't you have a seat."

She obeyed wordlessly, her palms already sweating and her heart pounding, dropping her back over the arm of the chair and looking around the room helplessly.

"Is something wrong?" she finally asked.

"Well," said Detective Tsukauchi. "Not wrong, but uh...difficult."

"Uraraka," said Aizawa, speaking with more clarity and directness. She turned to look at him. "A few months ago, we caught several leaders in the syndicate that ran the trafficking enterprise you were caught in."

She knew that should be good news.

She knew that, of course, but she suddenly couldn't breathe.

"Okay," she choked out weakly. "And...so...why am I here?"

"Because next month, along with several of the people who were arrested on sight will be tried, and we want to build as strong a cause as possible."

Fuck.

Fuck.

She heard him talking again. She saw Aizawa's lips moving, but she couldn't hear anything he was saying. Her mind was swimming, and her skin was burning.

A trial.

A public trial.

A reliving.

A retelling.

A...

She didn't even know she wasn't breathing until she saw black sunbursts in her vision and felt Aizawa's hand on her shoulder, gently pushing her back into her chair before she face-planted.

"I'm okay," she said, taking in a shaky breath. "I'm okay. I'm...I'm sorry..."

A cup of water was suddenly in her hand, and she wasn't sure where it came from, but it was something to hold onto, she supposed. "A trial..." she repeated softly, looking down at the water in the white paper cup. "Do...Do I have to...do I have to be a part of it?"

She heard one of the men in ties start to speak, but before a single syllable could be uttered, Aizawa cut in sharply, in the way that made it clear that they had spoken of this before she even showed up. "No," he answered sharply and insistently, his eyes focused on the other men in the room and not on her when he spat the word out. When he looked back at her, his tone softened a bit. "No," he repeated. "You're a minor, and they can't make you testify."

She appreciated what he was doing, making sure she wasn't being bullied into something that she didn't want. But all the same, she imagined there was more. She looked up at Tsukauchi. She trusted him. He was a familiar face, and he had been kind to her, and he had not been so horrible to talk to. "But..." she asked softly.

"But," said Tsukauchi. "We...we only have a few legitimate witnesses."

Ochako shook her head wearily. "What does that mean?"

"It means that many of the victims have a history of crime, from

misdemeanors to violent felonies.”

“Does...does that matter?” she asked, weakly, looking back at Aizawa. “W-why does that matter?”

“Because that can be used to weaken the legitimacy of the claim that all of this was by force and not consensually.”

“Wait...wait...” she said, shaking her head, her whole body buzzing anxiously. “Consensual?” She looked at Tsukauchi again. “Is that...is that really what...”

“No one thinks that Uraraka,” assured Aizawa. “But unfortunately, the unsavory past of many of the victims makes their testimony less valuable in a court of law, whether it should or not.”

It shouldn’t.

It definitely shouldn’t.

“Additionally,” said Tsukauchi. “A criminal past makes many of them less likely to come forward and talk for fear that it would be revealed.”

Fuck.

Fuck.

She felt sick.

“And you’re a hero,” continued Tsukauchi. “A hero from a loving family, who attends one of the most prestigious schools in the country. Your testimony could make a huge difference in proving the difference in sex work versus sex trafficking and in proving that the fights were not between two willing participants.”

“And...and that makes a difference?” she asked. It was a dumb question, she knew that, but her brain was swimming. “In sentencing?”

“It does,” said Detective Tsukauchi, almost reluctant.

“Oh god,” she breathed, holding herself tight and bending at the waist. “Oh god...”

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to gain control of the roiling panic inside of her, the overwhelming sensations rippling through her body.

She had come so far.

She had done so much work.

She was just starting to feel normal again.

She...

She didn't have time to shout out a warning, but, luckily, Aizawa's reflexes were fast, and he recognized that face (he had seen it enough times by now). She vomited into the trashcan that he was holding out in front of her. There had once been a time that this would have been less disgusting, but now she was eating on the regular, so her retching was a bit more substantial (and not to mention embarrassing). When she was done, Aizawa guided the cup of water back to her mouth, and had she had the brain space, she would have giggled in that moment... thinking of his nickname.

Dadzawa.

She had been so angry at him for so long that she hadn't thought of him that way in a long time.

But now, it seemed fitting.

By the time the buzzing in her ear had alleviated, and the cloudiness dissipated a bit, the room was far less crowded, not with only Tsukauchi and Aizawa as Nezu led the other men out of the room.

"Uraraka," said Aizawa from where he was kneeling in front of her chair. "You don't have to decide anything today, alright," he said. "You can take some time and think about this. Sleep on this. Talk to Dr. Shoko."

Dr. Shoko.

She would know what to do.

She would tell her what to do. But...

What if...

What if she told her to do it?

What if she told her to testify?

What if she told her it was for the greater good?



What if reliving her worst shames, detailing every nightmare, her most vulnerable moments...what if all of that was necessary?

She nodded dumbly. Aizawa was looking at her. She could feel his worried gaze.

"Would you like to call someone?" he asked softly. "Midoriya or Bakugo or..."

She shook her head.

No.

She had to...be away from everyone.

Everything.

She needed to think.

And the thought of worried looks and hushed voices, of going back to square one made her want to float herself into oblivion.

"I...uh...I need to go be somewhere else..." it was all she could manage. She stood up on shaky legs, any icy feeling filling her veins- blocking her sensations, blocking the fear, the panic, the overdrive happening in her body.

"I'm fine," she said- whispered- before she stepped away. "Can I be excused to return to the dorms?"

It was a question. But not really, because she was heading to the door to do just that. But Aizawa nodded all the same.

She stopped briefly at the door and turned to look over at her shoulder. "If...If I do this," she said. "If I decide that I can? Do...do I have to see them? Do I have to do it for everyone standing trial?"

"No," said Detective Tsukauchi, shaking his head. "This is for us so that we know what charges we can bring. You will be cross-examined by the defense, but you won't have to see anyone who was involved in the crime."

She nodded before stepping out into the hallway.

She closed the door behind her and looked down both hallways, trying to decide where to go. Everyone else would be in English with Mic. She could make it to her room without seeing anyone or talking to

anyone. But she knew Katsuki would come looking for her, and she didn't have it in her to ignore him entirely.

She took out her phone and typed out a quick text:

***Got sick. In my room for the rest of the day.***

She added an emoji so he wouldn't worry about her. Hopefully, he would think it was something like cramps and not ask any questions. She had no answers right now anyway.

###

Katsuki had texted her to ask if she needed anything. But, also, he wasn't buying it. She had a pass when she left class, and she had looked fine, which meant she was lying, or something had unexpectedly made her sick.

Either way, he doubted it was contagious.

However, even though it galled him, he wouldn't press. Boundaries weren't just for those extras but for him too. Just like them, he couldn't demand unfettered access to her emotions.

She would come around eventually when she knew what she needed.

But that didn't stop him from worrying.

###

"...I was supposed to be getting better," she said, her voice cold and low.

"And why do you think you aren't all of a sudden?" inquired Shoko.

Ochako snorted. "Because," she said. "As soon as I fucking heard about the trial, I went back to square one. I retreated. I threw up. I went to my room to be by myself. I detached like it was day fucking one."

"Did you?" asked Shoko. Ochako crossed her arms over her chest and looked at her, clearly annoyed. "Because it sounds like to me, you got overwhelmed. You did what your body needed, and now that you *can*

, you're here talking to me because you know you're safe."

"I don't know what that means," said Ochako. She was sure she would know if she thought about it for a little, but she was way too tired right now.

"Ochako, you are not at square one," said Shoko insistently. "Quite the opposite, in fact. The prospect of what you are facing is terrifying and can often be traumatizing, and your body reacted in a way that kept you safe until you got here to process. That's not square one; that's survival."

Ochako breathed out; she hadn't thought of that.

"I had another nightmare," she said. "Last night. It's been weeks, and so...I..." she rubbed her face. "Do you...is it the right thing to do? To testify?"

Shoko looked at her sympathetically. "I cannot answer that question, Uraraka," she said softly. "And I don't mean that in my shrink way where I am walking you to the right answer. I mean that I really cannot say. I can tell you that seeking justice can help to bring closure in some cases. I can also tell you that trials do nothing aside from retraumatize for many victims, and many wish they hadn't done it at all. And sometimes, it's both. I can also tell you that neither choice is cowardly and that whichever one you choose, I will be there with you to help you work through either."

Ochako looked down at her bleeding nailbed. She didn't know what to do. She had no fucking idea.

"Can you just..." Ochako dropped her head into her hands. "Can you walk me through it? If I were to choose to do it, what could I expect?"

Shoko nodded. "That's a good idea, Ochako."

Ochako had some idea about what it could be like, but nothing firm, nothing in front of her to focus on, and whatever she picked, she didn't want to go in blind.

###

It was 8:45 pm.

An hour and 15 minutes before curfew when there was a knock at Katsuki's door. It was a familiar knock, so he didn't scream out a

cranky “who is it?”

He opened the door, and while he wasn't surprised to see her standing there- he was surprised by how she looked. It had been a while since she had looked like that, and he had hoped, maybe, she was done looking like that.

Numblingly exhausted.

Red-rimmed eyes.

Dark circles.

Slumped shoulders.

Pale.

Sick.

He stood in front of her, waiting for her to move, waiting for her to speak, to tell him what she needed.

“I...” it came out from her dry, chapped lips, tight and pained. “Uh- there’s...”

He heard it before he saw it- heard it in the strain and break of her voice. And then, in a moment, she was in his arms, sobbing mercilessly and trembling like he hadn't felt her do in a long time. But there was a humanness in her cries that made him sigh in relief. She sounded like herself, even as her strangled cries broke the silence of the hallway.

He guided her back into his room, shutting the door behind him quietly with his foot before walking her over to the bed to sit down. As soon as he sat down beside her, she slumped forward across his lap, in a way that he usually would have made fun of her for, if not for the way she was shuddering and clinging to one of his arms, while the other held her tight against him.

He sat in silence, waiting and holding her.

Never quieting her, he only wiped away her tears when they fell too fast and blinding for her to keep up.

He wasn't sure how long they sat there, but he was beginning to lose feeling in the arm she was clinging to. Eventually, her sobs turned into hoarse, soft shudders, and he reached up to brush away the hair that

was clinging to her cheeks and her forehead.

“Do you need anything?” he asked when it was quiet enough for her to hear. “Water or...”

She shook her head, and he nodded. “All right,” he said. “Well, if you’re gonna hang out for a while, I’m going to need to get more comfortable.” She sniffed and nodded as she sat up and allowed him to shake out his arm and move further back, so he wasn’t sitting on the edge of the bed. When he was leaned against the headboard. She hadn’t moved yet.

Her hands were folded between her knees, still slumped over.

“Come on,” he barked, tugging at her sleeve. She turned and rolled toward him, her head settling on his thigh. She reached behind her clumsily, attempting to find his hand. When she did, she placed it on her head, a silent request that he was familiar enough with as he started to work his fingers into her scalp. Something else that felt so very her.

“There’s gonna be a trial,” she started, out of the blue, with no preamble. “In a few weeks, there’s going to be a trial, and they want me to testify.”

Fuck.

Shit.

Fuck.

He had only briefly read about that- not considering it to be something in their sphere. He supposed that may have been short-sighted of him, but it felt so far off at the time. At the time, the priority was keeping her alive. He hadn’t read a lot, but he had read enough.

Enough to know how lucky he was that she wasn’t catatonic in her room right now.

Enough to know that tears were good compared to how she could be responding now.

He knew what a trial meant and how unmoored she must be feeling right now.

“Shit,” he breathed.

She nodded. “Yup.” She seemed to be settling into herself slightly. “Aizawa said that I don’t have to do anything. I don’t have to...to testify.” He waited, knowing that there was more. “But...if I don’t, sentencing could be lighter, or other more vulnerable victims could be exploited.” Her eyes squeezed shut, and tears streamed from her eyes and onto the hand cupping her face. Her throat constricted, and her lip trembled as she shifted slightly so that the back of her head was against his thigh, and she could look directly up at him. “What kind of hero would I be,” she whispered. “...if...if I let that happen?”

Katsuki wanted to tell her that she had nothing to prove. She was a hero already, no matter what she decided to do.

She didn’t have to destroy herself to be a hero.

He wanted to tell her to fuck ten extra years for those pricks if it made her feel like shit.

But this was about her.

Not him.

“...Did you talk to Dr. Shoko about it?”

She nodded. “Yeah,” she said. “She was very honest about it. She told me that some people find it very healing, and some people wish that they never did it, and they swear that trials do more harm than good. Sometimes it’s very little change for a significant emotional toll. So... I...I feel fucked either way.”

He let his head drop back against the headboard and breathed, his thumb brushing across her forehead. He wanted to help her. But he was out of his depth. And he was sure she knew that.

“I...I don’t have any advice for you,” he confessed. She reached up and grabbed his wrist, guiding it down to her cheek, and pressed herself into his palm. “But you know that I have your back, right? No matter what. Every fucking step, I’m there.”

She looked up at him for a moment and exhaled, long and slow. “I’m afraid,” she said. “I’m afraid because I chose as soon as Aizawa told me, and I’m afraid of what that means.” He felt her lip tremble beside his thumb. “Having to say what happened in front of so many people, to be asked questions about it in front of people I’ve never talked to.

I..." she laughed bitterly. "I really hoped the worst was over."

He had thought that too- he had hoped that.

"And now, it's like picking open a fresh wound and..." she let out a shaky breath. "I feel like if I bleed anymore, I'm gonna die."

"You won't," he said. He wasn't sure if that was the right thing to say, but he had to tell her that- he had to remind her that, even if she felt like she was drowning, that she wasn't. She has a pulse, even when she can't feel it.

"You won't," he repeated. "If this is what you've decided to do, then you're gonna take every last one of those fuckers down."

She smiled, a soft, sad thing that broke his heart just a little.

There was so much more that he wanted to tell her.

Promises that he wanted to make to her, but he couldn't get his throat to work- to say all of that. So, instead, he held her through the night. Instead, he decided curfew wasn't a thing tonight.

He wasn't much of a talker, but he could do this for her.

He could do this forever...if she wanted him to.

###

Shota wasn't certain that she would be in class, and when he saw her, he wasn't even sure that she should be. Of course he had known a fucking trial was a possibility, but he had hoped it wouldn't be for a year or even in another 6 months. He had wanted Uraraka to be a little bit more recovered.

Not that she wasn't doing well.

Not that she hadn't made incredible progress in the last year. But even so, just a year felt tenuous at best. The ground had only just now stopped shaking beneath her, and just as she was getting her footing, the rug was torn out from under her... again. So he felt that familiar tightness in his chest, that grip of worry when she stepped toward him before class, all exhaustion and bundled nerves.

She swallowed and nodded, a look of grim determination in her eyes.

And he, for the briefest of moments, he felt sadness.

Some part of him had hoped that she would take the out he had given her.

Some part of him had wanted her to run from this- to tell her that she wasn't making the sane decision.

But she was doing what he taught her.

She was being a hero.

...Still.

After all of this.

He returned her curt nod. She looked up at him. "Dr. Shoko thinks it would be good to go to twice a week," she said. "W-while preparing for the trial."

He nodded. "Of course," he said. "Whatever you need."

She tried to smile; tried, but she looked so sad and tired as she made her way back to the seat.

She's just a kid.

They are just kids.

All of them.

And he sometimes had to push that fact away because how can he do what he does every day without doing that.

How can he look them in the eyes every day as a teacher and ask of them what he does without forgetting that they are kids?

But, right now, watching her rest her forehead in her hands, battling back her own yawns and tears, he can't seem to forget it.

###

*"You'll be asked to give details."*

###

Ochako hasn't woke up screaming and cold in a long time.

###



*“You’ll hear details, in very clinical cold language...”*

####

She woke one night to Mina holding her. She remembered she had screamed at Katsuki to leave. Told him that she didn’t want to see him, to touch him, or be touched by him. She had been half-frantic and frenzied with nightmares- her body aching with dread, poised against every possible threat.

###

*“But you just have to tell the truth,...No matter what. If you don’t understand a question, don’t make your best guess. Ask for clarity.”*

###

She had gone to Katsuki the next morning, afraid and apologetic, arms held out to him, hoping that she hadn’t run him away.

She hadn’t, of course.

He reminded her again that he wasn’t going anywhere.

###

*“Don’t let anyone bully or misrepresent your words. Don’t scream, but don’t be afraid to raise your voice either, Ochako. Demand To be heard. You’re the one to whom justice is owed.”*

###

Dr. Shoko had told her when Ochako had first come into the office that she would never insist on details or insist that Ochako talk gratuitously about what had happened. She had told her that it was not necessary.

Except now, she may not have a choice, and she didn’t want her first time recounting the events to be in a courtroom, fractured and disjointed and uncertain.

So she talked.

About the blood.

About watching the life leave someone’s eyes.

About how she felt their hands and bodies go slack in her arms.  
About the smell of the pillow when her face was shoved into it.  
The pain in her body.  
The tastes in her mouth.  
The bone-numbing cold.  
The biting acidic hunger.  
All of it.

Slowly knitting those things into her present.

###

Shoto ordered her some fancy, imported chocolates- maybe the most decadent thing she had ever eaten.

She sat in Koda's room for three hours after a long hard day in therapy and processed with the sweet, soft bunny who Koda assured her could keep a secret.

Jirou made several playlists for her, corresponding with certain moods, whether she needed to go on an angry run or take a relaxing shower.

There were many ways that she felt herself 'slipping back.' She was crying again. Her nightmares were as bad as they ever were. And her stomach was always churning, so her food had once again gone back to bland, small portions.

But...

She was also stronger than before.

Because this time, she felt safe with these people.

With her people.

Deku was sunlight and goodness and fierceness that made her feel normal and good when she was close to him, inexplicably warming her from the inside out. Denki didn't miss a chance to text her ridiculous memes or dad jokes. And on days when she could see the lack of sleep in Katsuki's eyes and features, when she adamantly

refused to let her sleeplessness impact his health, Shinso- a perpetual insomniac- was always game to sit up and watch campy late-night T.V shows with her.

She had people.

She wasn't at square one now because she trusted them all to love her through this.

###

Katsuki woke up to a sharp kick to his side and the sound of desperate, mournful sobs.

He knew this was part of it.

He knew this was part of what she been so afraid of.

This was the fight.

And fuck, he knew it wasn't about him, but fucking hell, he didn't know it would be this fucking hard to watch again- now that she meant so much to him.

Now that he knew her...really knew her.

Now that he knew the girl who stood up for him in an interview...the girl who wanted to kiss him and look at him with unabashed affection...the girl who jumped off a building to save a villain who wasn't a villain.

Now that he knew the girl who refused to go down without spending every last bit of her considerable fight.

And now to have her sobbing and afraid beside him- God, he wanted nothing more than to make it stop. He would do anything to make it stop. He wanted to kill or die or anything in-between to make it so she didn't have to feel like this.

He hated when she felt powerless when she was so fucking powerful.

It wasn't right.

Nothing about this was fair or right.

She woke, suddenly, choking and sputtering and shaking, heaving for breath.

"Ochako," he whispered, sitting up with her in bed. "You're here. You're safe..."

She whipped around to look at him, almost as if she didn't recognize the voice right away, like she had forgotten where she was. Her ragged breathing settled for a moment, and then her eyes widened. She didn't spend many nights with him; usually, it was accidental, her falling asleep clinging to his arm or his waist. But he knew for damn sure they weren't the only ones who didn't always spend the night in their own beds.

If anything, they were the *last* ones that Aizawa had to worry about sharing a bed.

"Fuck..." she swore, kicking off the bed and running toward the bathroom. But she only made it a step before the blankets tangled around her sent her careening forward.

"Ochako..." he was behind her in a moment, catching her under her arms as she tumbled. Even in the dark, he could tell that she wasn't going to make it far. She looked pale and sick, and he had carefully watched what she had eaten that day- and it wasn't a lot.

So she rag-dolled forward into his bracing arm as she vomited on his floor. He guided her slowly to the ground, the arm not wrapped around her waist, moved up and down as he rubbed soothing circles into her back as her dry heaves gave way to ragged sobs.

"I'm...I'm sorry," she murmured, trying to push up off the ground and out of his hold, but she was still in a fog. "I'll clean it, Katsuki..." her voice ached and trembled. "I'll clean it up. I'm sorry." He knew the fear from her nightmare still had a hold on her. She hadn't shaken it off, but to hear it directed at him- when she had never been afraid of him a day in her life- killed him. He held onto her tight.

"It's okay," he murmured into her hair. "It's fine. I can clean it."

She shook her head weakly, a whimpered protest escaping her lips.

"I have mouth wash," he said. "Go get that taste out of your mouth, and I'll clean it up."

He helped hoist her back to her feet and waited until she was steady enough on her feet to walk before he let her go. She seemed to be walking with a bit more surety as she trudged to the bathroom.

Katsuki made quick work of the mess as she cleaned up in the bathroom. She hadn't had a lot to eat, so there wasn't much to clean up, and being the clean freak he was, he had plenty of good cleaning supplies at hand.

So by the time she opened the door and stepped out, it was thoroughly cleaned. And while she looked slightly more awake, she looked no less distracted- if not embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "I thought I..."

"What are you apologizing for?" he said. "Not like I've never seen you toss your cookies before."

She let out a tired sound- like she was trying to laugh but couldn't quite bring herself to. "Come on," he said, guiding her back to the bed. "You look like you're gonna pass out any minute now." Ochako nodded and shuffled to the bed, pulling the thick comforter up over her head and curled as tightly into herself as possible.

"I'm fucking freezing," she murmured.

She shouldn't be. It was warm. But she was shaking like it was a snowstorm. He wrapped both arms around her- moving his hands up and down her arms, trying to remind her where she was.

Not in a cage.

Not starving.

Not on the ground.

She was with him.

Even if her body needed a tactile reminder.

"You're good," he murmured into her hair. "You're good. I got you."

She turned around to face him, and she buried her face in his chest, clinging to him like a koala, drawing out his warmth and taking cues from his steady breathing.

"Thank you," she whispered blearily, falling slowly back into sleep.

He didn't have words- he never does- in the face of her gratitude when she offered it so sweetly, so genuine. Gratitude he never knows how to accept.

Because he's so fucking grateful that he can be with her right now.

Grateful that she lets him.

###

Besides Tomihiko, Ochako had not seen anyone else that was like her- someone who went through that with her. And he had looked, somehow, even worse than he had when she helped get him out of that hole in the ground- eyes wide and bloodshot and desperate for anything to sate his pain.

Maya Hirano looked...different.

Better.

Beautiful.

Ochako knew that didn't always reveal what was on the inside, but it was more than just her put-together look. She looked calm, at peace, settled in her body. Ochako wondered what her secret was?

Ochako had gotten a close enough look at her back then after she helped her out of that cage. She had been the only one who Ochako was confident enough in to send for help. So Ochako had gotten a close enough look at her then.

"...Thank you for agreeing to meet with me," she said, sipping at her coffee. "I just figured with the trial coming up that it would be...a...a good time to..." she shrugged. "You know...thank you for saving me. For saving all of us. I don't think I ever did."

"You're welcome," said Ochako with a small nod, fighting back the urge to disrespect either of them by saying *it was no problem* or *don't mention it* because it was a problem, and how could they not mention it. "Thank you for helping me." She had been helpful- she had been the only one there that Ochako felt was able to help, and that had meant the world to her at the time.

"I just...uh...I don't think I'll be able to help any more than what I did that day." Ochako's brow furrowed in confusion.

"What do you mean?"

Maya tucked her hair behind her ear and looked down at her cup of tea, her cutely manicured nail brushing along the top of it. "I mean...

I...I'm not going to be testifying in the trial."

Ochako waited a moment to speak, groping for a possible response. She honestly hadn't thought about who would or wouldn't be testifying at the trial. And Ochako had only assumed Maya was because Maya had been the one to reach out to her.

"Oh," said Ochako. "Oh...Okay..."

"I'm sorry," said Maya, her eyes shaking with emotion and swallowing. "I...I'm so sorry, I know you are testifying, and I feel horrible about it, but..."

Ochako suddenly realized why Maya had reached out to her.

She had reached out to apologize.

She had reached out because she felt guilty, and the thought made Ochako's chest ache.

"Oh, Maya," she said, scooting forward in her chair. "You...you don't need to apologize for anything. You...You have to make the decision that feels right for you."

Maya nodded, but the corners of her mouth were turned down in a frown. "I...I know," she said. "But still...I wanted to explain because you..." she shook her head, her whole face just dropping. "You worked so hard to get us out, and now you're doing this, and I want... I wanted to help you. I wanted to step up like you are doing, but I just...I can't."

Ochako let out a shaky breath, this time not rushing to comfort her or assure her; this time, she just let her continue.

"I was a prostitute before then." She stated it factually without defensiveness or shame. "It wasn't perfect; it wasn't my ideal, and it was a hell of a lot better than what happened to us in that... *that* place. But...the minute I go up on that stand, they are going to drag that out for everyone as a reason that everything they made me do in there was consensual. And I have a job I really love now," she said. "I love it. Now I'm *not* ashamed of my past, I did what I had to do, and there wasn't a single person I worked with or for that was anywhere near the monsters in that place, but still, I could lose my job if this comes out and as much as I want to see those assholes go down, I do, but..." Ochako nodded. She understood. She truly did. She understood completely.

"I don't want them to take anything else from me," she said. "And I'm afraid that that is the only thing that will come out of me testifying." Maya looked at Ochako, sorry and apologetic, but not regretful, and that made Ochako feel at peace too. "I want to help you...I know-I know you're just a teenager," said Maya. "I should be braver than I am. At least as brave as you, but..."

Ochako's hand instinctively reached across the table, but she stopped before making contact and looked up at Maya. Maya nodded sweetly, and Ochako covered her hand with hers. "You are brave."

"You're a really amazing hero, Ochako," she said, and it struck Ochako that she didn't say "going to be" and she wondered if that was the first time she had heard that. "I...I feel safer knowing that you're out there."

Ochako smiled- not bright and blinding in that way she had tried to smile for Li in those moments when she believed they were both going to be rescued. It was a different smile, tired and honest and authentic- she hoped, even if it was different than All-Might's smile, different than Deku's smile, that it still made Maya feel better.

She hoped it made people around her feel brave.

###

Katsuki was pissed.

He was so angry, he wanted to punch something. But he had learned from his last fight with Ochako- when she had flung herself off of a building to save that kid- that when he had feelings about the victims that weren't Ochako, it was best to keep those to himself, at least until he could sort them out without putting those onto Ochako.

He knew- factually- comparing them to Ochako was not fair.

Ochako was a fucking hero.

She was the most badass person he knew.

She *could* handle more.

But... *fuck!*

Was she supposed to do everything for everyone?

She dragged their asses out of that place; mangled her own fucking



hands to do it. And now she was having to do this all by herself too. It sucked. It pissed him off. And he was sure that it wasn't fair, but he couldn't fucking change how he felt.

Not yet.

But this time, at least, he knew where it was coming from. When he had seen her jump off that building, he hadn't known for sure what he was feeling. He hadn't known how to name it. But now he did.

He was worried about her.

Worried that one more thing might break her.

And he didn't want to see that happen.

He wasn't going anywhere if it did.

He'd be around to help her pick up the pieces, but he sure as fuck didn't want to see it.

"...Bakugo?"

He looked across the study desk at Shitty Hair, whose eyes were on Katsuki's hands. Katsuki looked down to see the crack in his pencil. He loosened his grip before he snapped it in half.

"Wwwwwhat's going on?" asked Kiri carefully.

Katsuki snorted. "I'm fucking pissed." Katsuki didn't miss the way Shitty Hair's eyes widened- not surprised that Katsuki was pissed, but surprised that he was talking about it. So was Katsuki, to be honest. But, so far, Kirishima had actually given him some pretty solid advice through this whole thing.

"I'm pissed about the fact that Ochako is the only fucking one who is going to be testifying in this trial."

Shitty Hair breathed out and nodded. "Okay...okay...Have you talked to Ochako yet?" Katsuki shook his head. "Why not?" pressed Kiri.

"Because I don't need to put my shit on her right now," Katsuki answered. "She has the weight of this whole fucking trial on her shoulders right now; I'm not about to add to that just because I'm an asshole."

"You're not an asshole," said Kirishima.

He snorted. "I am," he said with a firm nod. "I've been reading about these fucking trials and why so many victims don't come forward, and me being pissed at them for that does make me an asshole."

"So, tell me," said Kiri, closing his book and looking at him. "Maybe it'll help you just to talk it out."

Katsuki scoffed, but also, he wasn't sure that Shitty Hair was wrong. Honestly, he wanted to sort out what he was feeling before he talked to Ochako about it. It wasn't that he didn't trust her. He just knew that his feelings weren't the most important ones in this case.

He also knew that this was a trigger point for her.

He honestly didn't really ever think about the other victims that had gone through it all with Ochako, beyond his obligation as a hero and a semi-decent person, but Ochako was his person, so when their decisions impacted her, he couldn't help but feel a way about it.

"I'm an asshole because my first thought when I heard that none of them- none of them are stepping up like Ochako- is that they are a bunch of cowards." Kiri didn't flinch and didn't seem to be judging him. If anything, he nodded thoughtfully, considering Katsuki's words. "And I *know* that's not true. I know they aren't cowards. I know that all of their fucking options suck. There's a reason that a part of me wanted to beg Ochako *not* to do this."

Kiri leaned into the table; his eyes filled with that stupid empathetic expression that Katsuki hated because it somehow made him feel understood without being condescended to.

...What an asshole.

"Why aren't they doing it?" asked Kiri, genuinely curious.

And that sparked a whole other ball of rage in the pit of Katsuki's stomach. He slammed his palm against the desk and snarled. "It's so fucked up," he said. "They could take the stand, tell everyone what happened, retraumatize themselves all for some asshole to drag out every last fucking thing they have ever done to delegitimize them."

Kiri looked appropriately angered at that. "Dude, that's fucked up."

"Right?! Ochako told me that the victim she met with today is worried about losing her job over what the trial could drag out into the public."

“Damn,” muttered Kiri. “That’s messed up.”

Katsuki leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, and glared at the ceiling. “So yeah,” he said. “I’m an asshole because, of course, no one wants to do that. Of course, no one wants to go through all of that, but...” he gritted his teeth and let out a low growl. “But...”

“But...Ochako’s doing it,” finished Kirishima softly.

Katsuki’s shoulders sagged, his whole body sighing in a thoroughly pathetic way, but he couldn’t quite hold it back.

“Ochako’s doing it,” Katsuki repeated with a heavy nod. “She’s doing it, and she’s...”

his voice dropped, quiet and revealing maybe a little bit more than he wanted but that he just couldn’t quite silence, especially under Kirishima’s inviting gaze. “I don’t want her to be alone.”

Kirishima let out a long, sad sigh. “But...she’s not alone.” Katsuki snorted dismissively, but Kirishima reached across the table and grabbed Katsuki’s wrist. “Dude,” he said. “Don’t do that. It’s not nothing that she has us. That she has Aizawa. That she has you. That is not nothing, and she knows that.”

Katsuki attempted a half-hearted eye-roll, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to commit to it, because all he could hear in his head were the words Ochako had shouted at him when they had fought last time—when he just didn’t understand why she would risk so much to save someone who didn’t want to be alive.

*“You caught me...over and over again...”*

She had said it, desperate and frayed and begging him to understand. He hadn’t really understood then. He had wanted to understand. The truth was he had thought her words were due to the fact that she just didn’t understand how fucking strong she was.

As far as Katsuki was concerned, she was always too apt to give people more credit than they deserved and herself less credit than she deserved.

But maybe some of it was actually just one of the ways she was stronger than him. She had no trouble relying on other people.

Katsuki had long grown past the notion that he could do everything on his own- but he fought against it with every inch of his stubborn being.

Ochako didn't fight it.

He was beginning to understand what a difference that makes. It had been hell for her- this decision. She had been terrified to do it. And she was a "legitimate" victim (a disgusting designation all on its own), without a shady past, from a nice family, attending a prestigious school, and had a close relationship with some of the most badass heroes-in-training, all on top of *being* a hero.

All of that, and it still had been hard for her.

But still, even knowing all of that, it was hard for him.

"Don't devalue yourself like that, man," said Kirishima. "She's not doing this alone. Sure, none of us can do this for her, and at the end of the day, it'll be her strength that gets her through this, but...you make her stronger. You've been pushing her to be stronger since first year. And that is going to help her get through all of this, yeah?"

Katsuki snorted, but he also nodded reluctantly. "Thanks, Shitty Hair," he mumbled. Kiri grinned at him, big and bright.

"No problem," he said. "I've become very wise in my old age!"

Katsuki scoffed at that and reached across the desk to flip the redhead's book open. "Uh-huh, well then you probably don't need me to tutor you then..."

"Nooo," cried Kiri throwing himself across the desk to grab Katsuki's arm before he could stand. "My wisdom has more to do with the existential questions of human existence and relationships but does not extend to the mysterious world of numbers."

"Uh-huh," he said, sitting back down in the chair. He figured he owed Shitty Hair one because he actually was feeling a little less pissed. Which meant he wouldn't be another thing that Ochako was managing.

"It's true," said Shitty Hair. "And your intelligence is of the...boring, number variety..." he gestured vaguely at his own book. "Between the two of us, we make the perfect man!"

Katsuki never failed to be impressed by Shitty Hairs' ability to be simultaneously so smart and so dumb at the same time.

###

**“Come to the roof .”**

Ochako blinked down at the text. Katsuki was never particularly loquacious when it came to text messages. He didn't include emoticons and exclamation points. But still...a little bit more detail would be nice.

Was he taking her to the roof to have a serious talk?

Was he breaking up with her?

Had she done something wrong?

She mentally rewound everything she had said and done that day. There was no arguing that she had been a lot more moody lately, but she had, for the most part, been quick to apologize. But maybe he had enough at this point.

She would understand.

She was annoyed with herself half the time right now- so she couldn't blame him for it.

And the trial was two days away. Which made her fairly certain that the worst was coming.

She went out onto the balcony and activated her quirk on herself before gently pushing herself up toward the edge, gripping her fingers against the textured brick of the walls to guide herself upward. When she got to the top, she gripped the edge and hooked her leg over it before reactivating her quirk.

She surveyed the roof, squinting into the night until her eyes adjusted. Somewhere she could hear Katsuki muttering angrily to himself. She followed the sound of his swearing. He was on his knees, smoothing out the edges of a thick blanket.

“Hey,” she called out questioningly. “Whatcha doin' ?”

He looked up abruptly. “That was fast,” he muttered. “I wasn't done

yet.”

“I took the short cut,” she said, looking over the corner that he had taken over; a blanket was rolled out, lined with several pillows and a stack of a few more blankets. “What’s going on up here?”

“What the fuck does it look like?” he said, standing up in front of her and gesturing toward the blankets.

She bit her lip to keep the smile from breaking out on her face. “It- it looks like you’re doing something sweet for me.”

He glared down at her. “Yeah,” he said, his voice defensive. “What of it?”

She laughed and threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tight before looking past him again at the adorable set up he had made.

“Nothing,” she said, tipping her face upward to look at him. “What the occasion?”

His eyes narrowed in offense. “Do I need an occasion? I’m always sweet to you!”

Sweet wasn’t typically a word one would use to describe Katsuki and certainly not one he would typically use to describe himself, but she would let it slide.

“You don’t need one,” she said, kissing him on the cheek before she lowered herself onto the blanket. Katsuki followed close behind, reaching behind himself to grab another blanket to throw in her face. She let out a surprised *meeep*, catching it before it collided with her face.

“I thought you were being sweet,” she protested.

“I am,” he said. “Your ass is always cold, so I brought blankets! I’m a fucking prince.”

She laughed again, loud and unrestrained, before she dropped her head on his shoulder and leaned back into the edge of the roof, the soft pillow offering support.

“Seriously though,” she said, nudging him as he settled beside her. “Is- is something wrong?”

“Why would something be wrong?”

She tugged nervously at her own fingers for a moment before Katsuki's hand fell warm and comforting against the back of hers, curling his fingers between hers. “I just...I haven't seen much of you the last few days, and that's...that's completely fine! I know I've been a lot lately, and I wasn't sure if maybe I had just been...” she didn't know how to finish it. She wasn't sure what she was saying.

He didn't say anything for a long moment; he just sat there staring her down. “You have been a lot lately,” he said, but not cruel or dismissive. The thing was- they didn't lie to each other. He never did. And for him to tell her that she wasn't would be a lie. But his hand was holding hers, his thumb moving gently across her palm. “But you're allowed to be a lot right now.” She leaned into his solid warmth, reminding herself that he was here. That she was not alone. “And I'm a big boy, Ochako. I'm the last thing you should be worrying about right now.”

She pulled the blanket tighter around her.

“Listen,” he said. “You asked me once if you rely on me too much.” She nodded. She remembered that. It was the first time he hugged her. Really hugged her. “The answer then and now was no- and right now I want you *to try*. I want you to come up with whatever idea you have in your head as too much, and I want you to aim past that because I fucking guarantee you that what you think is too much is not. And I want you to rely on me right now. Because you...” he shook his head. “You're doing this, Ochako. You're doing this heroic thing. And I hate that I can't help you with it. I hate that you're doing it alone. So just... You can rely on me as much as you need to right now, yeah?”

She tucked herself under his arm and let her head fall against his chest. “Thank you,” she whispered. It was all she could say. Because if she said more, she wasn't sure if she could say anything other than how much she loved him in this moment. Loved every last thing about him. She had told him before that she loved him. But it was in the way she was certain he had already known.

She wasn't so sure that he knew that she was in love with him.

“And right now,” he said, reaching past her to pick up a plastic container that she had missed. “I want you to rely on me for cake.”

She sat up so quickly she almost knocked the container out of his hand, but he raised it in time to protect it from her onslaught.

“Cake?!”

He held it out of her reach for a moment before he also retrieved a fork. “Hold on,” he said. “Don’t make a mess! These are my blankets.”

She looked at him as though he were a silly boy for even saying it. “Oh, Katsuki,” she said. “You know I am gonna make a mess.”

He glared at her, but all the same, he surrendered the container to her and the fork. She hummed happily and sliced her fork through the cake.

“Katsuki,” she said, bringing the overly large slice to her lips and taking a bite, not all of the light, fluffy sponge making it inside of her mouth. He reached down to wipe the bits of crumbs off of her lips.

“What,” he asked.

“Is this our first date?”

“Eh?”

She finished her bite and shifted more comfortably back into her pillow. “Our first date?”

“What kind of first date is this,” he said, sounding almost offended.

“Uh...” she gestured toward her cake, the blankets, and up to the blanket of stars overhead. As if that wasn’t all of her favorite things. “The perfect first date?”

“Cheap date more like,” he scoffed.

“Exactly,” she said. “Even better!”

He rolled his eyes, but when she offered up the fork to him, a bite of fluffy cake on the end, he accepted it without complaint.

“You want it to be our first date?” he asked.

She shrugged and shifted so that she could drape her legs over his and turn to face him. “I think it’s a great one.”

“Hmmm...” he seemed unconvinced. “Fine,” he said. “But I’ll take you on a better one.”

Later.



After.

He didn't say it, but she could hear it in his words.

After the trial.

When this part was behind her.

Though she had come to stop thinking about it as this "thing" that she would put behind her or get past, and rather as a thing that was now a part of her.

But when the trial was over, she would want to celebrate-eventually.

She had a feeling that Katsuki hadn't meant this as a date but as a way to get away, a way to relax, a way to take her mind off...everything.

So she leaned into that. Leaned into him. She spent that night eating cake, and looking at the stars, and telling Katsuki about all of the different constellations and the mythology behind them, just like she used to do with her daddy.

And, while Katsuki wasn't such an entertaining audience as he had been, he was every bit as attentive.

He always was.

He was always listening to her.

Always watching her.

Somehow always knowing exactly what she needed.

And this was it.

# To Tell Her Truth

## Chapter Summary

TW:

Testifying about assault- not in gratuitous detail but it's there.

## Chapter Notes

You guys, I really can't believe but this story is coming to a close soon! I have two MAYBE three chpts left in the final "arc" depending on what inspiration strikes me!

But you guys have been so amazing. I have loved writing and sharing and processing through this story, and the community connection and the listening to your thoughts and hearing your feedback has just made it all so much better than I imagined so thank you so much!

Ochako knew that she should be listening. She should be focusing on the row of seats across from her. She dragged her forehead away from the glass window of the car and turned her head slightly, squinting her eyes and trying to focus on Detective Tsukauchi's words as he broke down how the next couple of days would go. The trial had already been going a week.

"It's a long one," he explained. "Just because we are trying to build a credible case against the whole lot of them. They have heard from several investigators at this point, along with doctors and examiners."

She nodded absently.

She knew there were two other victims who testified, but she wasn't sure who they were, requesting that their identities remain as anonymous as possible.

That was something.

"You won't see any of the perpetrators in person," he said. "But there will be photos."

She nodded, her eyes flicking back to the window to look outside. She watched the city fly by outside her window. Trying to sort out how she had ended up here. A few weeks ago she had been happier than

she thought she would ever be again. A few weeks ago she had been laughing with her friends and kissing a cute boy in her room, and now.

Now...

She was bone-tired again.

Now she was dressed in black pants and a blazer that was making her so hot that she could not breathe. She reached into her pocket to feel the familiar texture of the baku pendant that was concealed there. She had been told not to wear jewelry, but no one could see it in her pocket.

But not even this was able to ground her right now.

Now she was a month into trying to piece together a nightmare just to live a whole new nightmare in front of a bunch of strangers- a panel of judges who she had never seen before in her life.

Now...

Now...

Her head was swimming.

Her skin was on fire.

Her mouth was so dry that a breath of air could barely squeeze through it and into her lungs.

Dammit...

“Pull-over...”

She wondered for a moment if she had said it out loud because no one responded right away. Detective Tsukauchi continued talking and Aizawa hadn't looked up from the file he was flipping through.

She thought for a moment that was fine- that there was no need for her to say it again. She could just take a breath. She tried again, but she couldn't seem to get a good gulp of it. Her lungs were burning.

It was so hot in this blazer.

And in this car.

She needed...

"Pull-over," she croaked, but this time louder, her head falling back on the seat. This time Aizawa sat up and looked at her.

"Uraraka," he said, leaning forward. "What is..."

"Pull over," she gasped suddenly, her hands frantically groping at the door. "Pull over..." she repeated again, her vision narrowing as she tugged fruitlessly at the handle. "Pull over...pull over..."

She was drowning.

She could feel it.

She was going to die in the back seat of this car, gasping for breath.

She could hear orders being barked somewhere in the car- she vaguely recognized it as Aizawa's voice. But she couldn't quite make out what he was saying. She wasn't even aware that the car had pulled to a stop. She could hear a buckle being undone in the car, but the door still wouldn't open. She heard another door open.

"Shouta we don't have time for..."

"We have time," she heard her teacher bark back solidly. "We *have* time."

She didn't have time.

She regretted her decisions.

All of her decisions. She regretted thinking that she could do this alone. She should have known. Katuski had fought her on it- along with several other classmates. But she had told him that he shouldn't miss class. It wasn't like he would be allowed in the room anyway with her.

He had class.

He told her he wanted to go. That he could study and do homework while he waited. He just wanted to be there with her. But she had stood firm. She told him that she could do this, and, in the end, he grudgingly acquiesced.

She wished, suddenly, that he had not.

She wished she hadn't been stupid.

She wished she wasn't alone.

She wished she could this.

She wished like hell that she didn't have to be there at all.

She wished...

"Uraraka..."

The door opened and she almost spilled out onto the concrete, but she caught herself in the frame of the door as she doubled over to take in deep breathes of fresh air.

"Uraraka..."

Her gaze snapped upward from where she hung limply out of the car, half in, half out, like a broken doll. Aizawa was squatted in front of her on the curb, leaning back on his heels.

"What's happening right now?"

She squeezed her eyes shut.

Why had she told him no?

Why did she think she wouldn't need him?

Why was she still trying to pretend that she could do any of this by herself? She had told Katsuki over and over again that it had never been her; it had never been just her.

It had been her.

And Maya.

And Aizawa.

Her parents.

Izuku.

Shoto.

Katsuki...

And Li.

She has never been alone.

She needed her people.

"I..." she sobbed trembling. "I...can't...I can't... I can't do this alone," she confessed with a bitter sob, holding herself tight and shaking her head. "I...I can't do this alone, sensei. I was wrong. I thought I could. I really thought that I could." She was talking too fast and she couldn't breathe. She couldn't get her lungs to work. "I thought I should do it alone, but that was dumb. That was so fucking dumb. So stupid. I need...I need..."

She didn't know what she needed.

Or she knew exactly what she needed, she just didn't know how to ask for it.

Asking felt so pathetic, so sad...so unheroic.

Aizawa shuffled slightly in front of her, going up to his feet. And then she could hear the far-off sound of his voice. It was calm at first and then it sounded like he was arguing and then she heard an unmistakable bark through the speaker.

"I said put her on!"

Aizawa went back down to his feet and held his phone out lazily to her. She took it weakly and brought it to her ear.

"Hello..."

"Ochako..." the familiar voice was a comfortable murmur in her ear. "What's going on?"

"I...Katsuki...I thought I could do this..." she dropped her head into her palm. "I thought I could do this alone. I was wrong. I was wrong. You were right. I was...I was stupid. I didn't want you to miss class or have to sit around for eight hours. That was dumb of me. I really, really need you." Her voice trembled pathetically with the tearful confession, but she didn't care. "I need you here with me."

"You're right," he said. "You are a dummy." She hugged herself tighter. "You're a dummy if you think that I'm not already at this fucking courthouse."

“What?!” It came out strangled and unsure.

“Yeah,” he said. “Me, Deku, Icy-Hot, Four-Eyes, Pinky, Shitty-Hair, we were gonna stay hidden just in case, but...”

She let out a small laugh and looked at Aizawa, who looked annoyed on a principle but with no real venom to it.

“Now...get down here,” he said, grit to his voice. “You can fucking do this! Get your ass down here.”

She smirked at the phone. “Don’t tell me what to do,” she said back.

“Tch...”

Ochako handed the phone back to Aizawa who took it and brought it lazily to his ear.

“All of you?” he asked, not at all sounding surprised.

She could barely make out Katsuki’s voice as she straightened herself out and took another deep breath. “Not everyone,” he said. “Just like...some of us.”

“Who gave you permission to skip class?” She didn’t hear the answer, but Aizawa’s response gave it away. “Well, Mic does not have authority to write passes for all of you...Uh-huh...neither does All-Might.”

She closed the door and turned to settle into her seat. Detective Tsukauchi looked her over.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“No,” she answered honestly. “Not at all.”

He nodded in understanding. “Thank you for doing this, Uraraka.”

She smiled weakly. She still wasn’t sure if it was worth it.

###

Katsuki had wanted to respect her wishes.

He really did.

He had made effort anytime she explicitly asked for something to

respect what it was that she asked. But when she had told him not to show up, there was a part of him that knew this wasn't as simple as that. There was a part of him that knew there was something else going on. It wasn't so much that he thought he knew better than her, it was just that he had listened to everything she had been saying to him for the past 6 months.

She had said over and over and over again that she couldn't do this alone. She had yelled it at him, for fuck's sake. Hit him over the head with it until it sunk into his thick skull.

But he also knew that knowledge did battle with her desire not to be a burden on him or anyone else.

So he wanted to be there; just in case. And then of course Deku wanted to come, which meant Icy-Hot would come, and then Shitty Hair was suddenly tagging along. He thought about telling them all to beat it.

But then he also knew he wasn't the only one that cared about Ochako.

He wasn't the only one who wanted to be there for her.

And he wasn't the only one that she needed.

He didn't really have a right to tell them to stay away.

And he was glad he didn't. Because the smile that broke out on her face when she saw them was one of the best he had seen in a long time- filled with relief and affection and sweetness. She broke away from her entourage and ran to meet them, hugging each and every one of them.

Everyone holding her close and whispering words of encouragement to her- and it looked like, somehow, all of them said what she needed to hear.

When she hugged him, it was tight and lingering and long, her face buried in his neck as she breathed him in. "Thank you, Katsuki." He cupped her cheek and brushed his thumb under her eye and over the curve of her cheek. He dropped his forehead down to press it to hers so he could talk to her without anyone else hearing it.

"I told you I was with you, dummy." She nodded and let out a long breath, her shaking hands digging into his shoulders. She laughed, and



even though it was heavy with nerves, it was sincere.

“I know,” she said. “But I’m pretty dense you know.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

She tipped her head up to him and pressed a quick kiss to his lips, before dropping back down flat onto her feet. Her fingers were still shaking as she kept her grip firm on his shoulders, even as she pulled away from him.

Almost like she had meant to step away but couldn’t quite bring herself to let go of him yet.

“Uraraka,” called Detective Tsukauchi. Her eyes squeezed shut and she winced, tugging herself back into him, but he stalled her movement, placing his hands on her shoulder. When she looked up, he could see the panic rising in her expression.

“Katsuki,” she breathed, her voice was aching, asking him for something that he just didn’t know how to give her, and it took everything in him not to grab her by the hand and run; take her away and tell her that she did not have to do this.

But that wouldn’t help her.

He knew that.

“You can do this,” he assured her, bending his knees so he could look her in the eyes. “You can do this.” She moved to shake her head, but he caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger. “*You ...*” he spoke firm and clear. “... *Can* do this.” She stared at him for a moment, searching his face for something, as if testing to see if there was anything inside of him that was lying to her right now.

There wasn’t. He wasn’t lying.

She could do this.

And he saw it- the moment her expression changed. The fear was not gone, not at all. But there was something else there too now.

The look he had seen from her at Sports Festival.

And the look he had seen over and over and over again over the past year.

She could do this.

And she knew it.

She went up one more time and hugged him around his neck tight, kissing him once more on the lips. Chaste and sweet and fast. And not at all embarrassed even though there were more people around than usual. But if she didn't care, neither did he.

"All right," she said. "I...I gotta go."

He nodded. "Yeah."

Though this time he was the one who held on a little longer- finding it impossibly hard to let her go.

###

Day one and two passed in a blur. It wasn't the worst, but it was exhausting, draining her of every bit of energy, and all she did was answer basic questions about herself.

*What was her name?*

*What was her age?*

*Did she know where she had been taken?*

*Did she know how many days she was there?*

*Did she know the names of any of her captors?*

*Could she identify them?*

Most of her questions were either factual or yes and no. Detective Tsukauchi had told her to expect as much. He had warned her that it may get harder in the second half of the week. So she didn't even bother pretending that she didn't want Katsuki there with her.

By the third day, it was just him and Izuku, most of her peers going back to regular class.

That was fine by her. She knew they were there for her.

And it did help to know that Katsuki was there when she left at the end of the day and that she had a dorm of people who cared about her when she returned back after she was done. Even if all she had the

energy to do was say good night before she went to bed.

Her third day was her first day actually speaking to what happened. It was bolstered with pictures of several of the accused, and medical reports that were read off by the prosecution. Dr. Shoko had told her that the medical reports would be detailed and they were indeed; read off like a menu of the physical damages done to their bodies.

She had warned Ochako that there may even be pictures.

“It’s so that the lay judges have all the evidence,” she had explained. “It will be hard to hear and hard to look at it, but they are not doing it to hurt you. They are doing it to build a case.”

“How did they keep you under their control, Uraraka-san?”

She spoke of the cages. One was even brought out for evidence. They were smaller than she remembered.

She spoke of the quirk suppressors.

She spoke of the starvation.

She spoke of the hotel rooms.

She pointed at pictures of people who had been in those rooms with her.

That night she had told Katsuki that she wanted to be alone. He told her he would leave his room unlocked if she needed him.

Just knowing she had the option did help her sleep that night.

The fourth day was more of the same.

*Did she see anyone die?*

*Tell us about the fights? How did they assure compliance? What happened to those who lost the fights? What happened if you refused to end the fights?*

*How did you escape?*

*Do you recognize this person?*

A lot of them felt like the same questions just said in different ways. Dr. Shoko said that might happen and that she should answer them as

clearly as possible and ask for clarification if she was confused.

“Asking for clarification will not undermine your testimony,” she told her. “But depending on the defense, answering a question in an unclear way can be used and twisted against you.” The thought made her blood run cold But so far, she had only answered factual questions.

And that she could do.

The fifth day, after they had gathered all the information from her; after she had worn out her heart and soul telling over and over and over again what happened to her just in different ways- the defense stood in front of her.

She felt sick.

*“Don’t let them talk you out of our own experience,” Shoko had said. “It seems easy, but it’s harder to do.”*

She swallowed hard, her eyes briefly searching out Aizawa in the front row. It wasn’t open to the public, but she had been allowed to have one adult with her in the room. She didn’t want to traumatize her own parents any more than she already had. And Aizawa was already intimately familiar with the details of the case.

He wouldn’t be traumatized by anything he heard.

Katsuki would have been with her, if she had asked. But she never would have asked. She wasn’t so sure that either of them could handle it. And she knew if he was in the room with her, if her parents were in the room with her, their feelings would take up too much space in her mind.

They would be all she could think about- probably to the detriment of her testimony.

“Uraraka-chan...” Her eyes snapped to the man standing in front of her. “17-years-old; 3rd year at UA High School on the Hero track, correct?” She nodded. “Please answer verbally.”

“Yes,” she said, trying and failing to stop the shaking in her voice.

“You were quoted earlier as stating that what you learned at UA helped you survive your time in captivity.”

“Yes.”

“How?”

She cleared her throat and tried to make eye contact with the room. “The course is mentally, physically, and emotionally taxing,” she answered, her voice sounding far off over the percussion of blood in her ears. “While UA is not nearly as brutal, life and death circumstances weren’t entirely new to me.”

“Would you say your hero training gave you an advantage against your opponents?”

Her brow furrowed. She could hear a trap coming, but she couldn’t really see it. She was...felt like was sinking through the floor.

“Not opponents,” she whispered.

“Sorry, what was that?”

“Not opponents,” she choked out. “We weren’t there by choice. It wasn’t like opposing sports teams or something like that. So I don’t care for the term opponent.”

“Oh...oh sure,” he continued. “But you did win, correct? Several times?”

“I...”

Fought for her life.

Was forced to watch people ripped a part...

...Smelled their blood.

... heard their screams.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “That’s not...”

“No,” he asked, exaggerating the question. “According to you, it was a fight to the death, correct?”

“Yes,” she rasped.

“And you’re alive, we can all presume.” Her throat felt dry and her tongue suddenly very heavy in her mouth. “So I assume that means that you won those fights to the death.”

She felt dizzy. She tried to turn to the judge, but the attorney spoke up before she could say anything.

“Your family is lower SES,” he said suddenly, abrupt and bordering on accusatory.

“Objection,” said the prosecution. “This is not relevant.”

“It absolutely is,” said the defense. “Credibility and motivation of the witness are extremely relevant, especially in this case.”

The lead judge eyed him warily before nodding.

Ochako’s eyes searched pleadingly for some out. She was feeling overwhelmed. Like she was about to screw this up entirely. Panic twisted in her chest, squeezing the air out of her lungs. She didn’t understand where he was going, partly because she was certain her brain wasn’t getting enough oxygen.

She couldn’t think straight.

“Uraraka,” said the defense. “Answer the question.”

“Uh...” she shook her head, trying to focus her gaze on Aizawa, but he was swimming in her vision. But even with that, she could see he was moments away from murder. “Yeah...I mean...Yes.”

“Yes, your family has historically struggled financially?”

“Yes,” she breathed out.

“And that motivated your desire to become a hero?”

“I...I wanted to become a hero to give my family a better life,” she said. “Financially and otherwise.”

“Noble,” he said, but his voice sounded cold. “But the hero track is not a guaranteed track to wealth- especially with a rescue-oriented quirk.”

Her chest was hurting.

Was it supposed to feel like this?

Was this normal?

She felt the familiar churning in her stomach chewing away at her insides and wondered what would happen if she threw up right here

and now.

“I don’t understand the question...”

“Just that you have a history of making life choices based on how much money you can make off of them,” he said. “And if you did in fact join this fight club of your own volition- using your skills as a hero in training to earn extra cash- it would have been prudent too...”

“No,” she said- at least she thought she did, she could barely hear her own voice.

“Yes,” he said. “You would deny it now that the operation was uncovered but there are several witnesses who have claimed that everyone was there of their own volition. And while tasteless and illegal, no doubt,” he said. “It does change things, doesn’t it?”

She shook her head.

Wrong move as she felt herself slowly detaching from her body in a way that she hadn’t done in a long time.

“Additionally,” he continued. “You were a fan favorite, were you not?” She tried to speak but nothing came out. “And I imagine killing for money and sex for money are activities that UA would...”

“For Christ’s sake, your honor,” interrupted the prosecuting attorney. “The witness is a minor and this line of questioning is becoming abusive.”

“It is not abusive,” said the defense, voice perfectly calm, not rising to meet the tenor of the prosecution. “While I have no doubt that the place did vile things to those involved, this witness is a 17-year-old young woman who has been highly trained at one of the most prestigious schools in the world. Are we to expect that she’s capable of being trained as a hero but not capable of being treated as an adult in a court of law? Especially when she may or may not have used her hero skills and sexual prowess to...”

She wasn’t sure what the end of that question was, because Ochako heard more noises rising over the voice...

She heard yelling and banging and shouts and footsteps.

Her head was hurting too. Had she hit her head? Or fallen?

It was hard to tell as her vision clouded and blackened.

###

Katsuki jumped at the sound of the door opening. He was bent over his homework when the clatter of noise drew his gaze upward. He waited as everyone filed out of the courtroom. There were several faces that were becoming familiar to him.

Only because he searched all of them until he founds hers.

But she didn't come out.

When she didn't come out, he felt his blood pressure spike. When a medic ran in, he felt his palms prickle. He waited a few more minutes before he was on his feet, shoving his way into the room.

"Fuck..." his heart plummeted when he saw Uraraka sitting on the ground- disturbingly pale, her eyes lulling shut. She was propped up against Aizawa as a medic kneeled in front of her- checking her pulse and looking down at the blood pressure cuff around her.

A few feet away two men in suits were practically screaming at each other in front of another man who looked as though he were mediating it. Katsuki scanned the room and wondered how the fuck there wasn't a single fucking woman in this room. Seemed to him that perspective would be a valuable one in this case.

"It was a completely unethical line of questioning!"

"I'm doing what is best by my clients."

"She's a child!"

"She's seventeen."

Katsuki growled low and angry but refocused his attention on Ochako.

"Is she okay," he snapped angrily, fear trembling in his voice. She was semi-conscious, eyes fluttering open as a medic coaxed her to breathe deeper.

"Bakugo," said Aizawa. "Go wait outside."

Bakugo scoffed. "No fucking way." He knelt in front of her. "Is she all right?"



"I'm fine..." Her voice was dull and lifeless. "I'm...I'm fine..." She tried to push herself up, but her body was trembling like it had the day the story broke, right before she had passed out. She sunk back, her limbs hanging desperately limp.

"I'm sorry," she managed through pale lips. "I'm...I'm sorry...I'm sorry. I messed up."

"You didn't mess up, Uraraka..." one of the men who had been arguing a few feet away approached. "We have a recess until tomorrow and I've been assured that that line of questioning will not be allowed."

"I'm sorry," she repeated again, as if she hadn't heard him, her head lulling to the side. "I'm so sorry."

Katsuki wished everyone was gone; wished it was just the two of them so he could hug her and hold her until she knew she was safe.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I fucked it up."

"No," the man assured her, kindly, somewhat sating Katsuki's rage against everyone in this room who was not Ochako. "I promise. You did not. That was completely out of line."

But it wasn't registering with her.

She continued to mutter under her breath, her voice shattered and broken. When she opened her eyes, they were dull and hazy, they looked nothing like her. He hadn't seen her look like that in...a long time.

He felt an unfamiliar prickling in the back of his eyes.

He wanted to touch her so bad.

To hold her to his chest and remind her that he was here.

That he wasn't going anywhere.

And if she decided this was too much, that she didn't want to do this at all- well, he would support that. Fuck being a hero if it cost her this much.

By the time she was on her feet, she looked no more present- no more aware- no more alive.

She hadn't even looked at him.

In the car ride back, she sat in silence, head pressed to the window.

No one spoke.

No one knew what to say.

Aizawa looked something between exhausted and pissed. If Katsuki were inclined to sympathy, he almost felt it for his teacher in this moment. The man looked strung out to a whole new level. After she was out of the car, she turned to look at Aizawa before heading to the dorm.

"Tomorrow at 8 am," she asked.

He inhaled, a sharp painful noise before he nodded. "Yeah. We'll be here."

Ochako nodded and continued to walk toward the dorm. Katsuki walked beside her- despite her lack of acknowledging him. He was watching, listening, waiting. It felt like she was holding her breath until she passed out.

"Do you want to take the shortcut," he asked.

She nodded. That was good, at least she could hear him. When they were standing beneath her balcony, he looked down at her. "Do you want me to come with you?" He searched her gaze for any clue or indication as to what she may want. But there was nothing there.

It was blank.

"Yeah," she answered.

He nodded and let her activate her quirk on them. He wrapped his arm around her waist, and she let herself fall against him. He pushed himself off the ground at a practiced force. He reached up with one hand, grabbing hold of the railing and guiding them both over the edge.

"Release," she whispered, pressing her fingers together.

They stood on the balcony for a moment; her arm over his shoulder, forehead pressed to the base of his throat.

"Come on," he said, guiding her over to the bed. She sat on the edge,

and her whole body caved in on itself. He sat beside her for a moment before he shifted one leg onto the bed so he could turn to look at her.

To say...anything.

To ask her what she needed.

But before he could speak, he was smothered by a frantic, desperate-almost panicked kiss- his eyes widened at the suddenness and was a hairs-breadth away from leaning into the kiss when he felt her sob against his lips.

He pulled away enough to speak. "Ochako you..."

Her hands found the back of his head, lacing through his hair and pulling him in for another kiss- in that way he normally liked, in that way he had missed over the last few weeks. Except, this time, her hands were shaking, clinging just a little too desperately, like she was afraid he was going to go somewhere.

He pulled away again, gently. She gave chase yet again, her eyes wide and pleading.

"Katsuki," she gasped out. "Pl-please...please..."

She was asking him for something, but he was pretty sure it was not for this. He was pretty sure this was not actually what she wanted right now. This whole thing had started with her wanting to feel normal- and right now, he knew that fear and self-loathing and pain and confusion were taking over her entirely.

She was going back to what she knew.

To what she thought he knew how to give her.

But they weren't the same people anymore. They had both changed. And he had so much more to give her than just that.

"Ochako," he said, his voice quiet but also firm. "Ochako, stop."

Even in her frazzled state, even with her lips inches from his, she heard his words and stopped. She squeezed her eyes shut as whatever pretext of control shattered entirely around her- whatever she had attempted to put at bay came careening into the forefront of her consciousness.

His hands found the side of her face as she waited; waited to decide if

she wanted to feel this yet. He would understand if she didn't. If she needed to hold onto the numbness a little longer in order to get through these next few days, he would understand. But it seemed she didn't have the wherewithal for it anymore.

In a moment, she shattered into him, her hands fisting into the back of his shirt as low, mournful sobs vibrated into his shoulder.

"I can't do this," she cried. "I can't do this, Katsuki. I can't...I can't...it's too hard..."

Harsh moans of pain jolted her body against his as he held her close- his own grasp equally desperate as he cradled the back of her head in his hand and rocked her back and forth against him. Everything in him hurt- every instinct telling him to fix or to run.

But neither were options.

He didn't know how to fix this.

And he would never run from her- ever.

"I can't do this...it's too hard...it's too hard!"

"I know," he whispered, dropping so he was close to her ear.

"Everything hurts," she gasped out in strained whisper. "Everything hurts." She twisted the bunched the fabric of his shirt between her hands and ground her forehead into his shoulder harder; as if she was trying to force some of that pain out of her body. "I don't want to hurt anymore."

He swallowed hard, trying to keep whatever noise it was in his chest put- a growl, a hush, his own stifled sob- really he had no idea what it was and he didn't want to find out.

*I don't want to hurt anymore.*

He didn't want her to hurt anymore either. He would do anything to fix this for her if he could, to keep her from hurting.

But he knew that wasn't an option.

And he was convinced this is what made living people so damn hard. It wasn't the being hurt by them; it was the watching them hurt- when there was nothing he could fucking do to stop it.

"I'm so tired of it, Katsuki. I'm so tired of feeling like shit. Of feeling weak..." her words came tumbling out of her in harsh gasps of pain, her hot tears soaking his shirt. "I just want it to stop."

He maneuvered himself, and her until she was looking up at him. But even the effort of holding her head up to look at him seemed beyond what she had strength for, so he cupped both of her cheeks in his hands and held her gaze toward his. He had seen her cry a million times at this point.

But never so close.

"You can do this," he said as he brushed his lips over one of her cheeks. "You can fucking do this." He guided her head down so he could kiss her forehead. "You're not weak." He kissed the space between her brows. "You're the strongest person I know." He could feel the ragged sobs on his skin as he caressed her other cheek with another kiss. "The best goddamn hero I know." A weak broken breath hit his cheek as he kissed her temple. "You're so fucking badass." He kissed the bridge of her nose. "And so goddamn beautiful." Her breath hitched as her grip on his shirt loosened just a little. He paused and pressed his forehead into hers again, nuzzling softly against her. "You're my favorite fucking person in this whole goddamn world."

A wet, tear-heavy sigh released from somewhere in her throat, and her shoulders, slowly released some of their tensiity.

"I wish I could make this better for you," he whispered. "I wish I could...blow something up or kill someone if it meant that this could be better for you."

Her eyes were shut still, but he could see her lids smoothing just a little, rather than slammed shut as if she was trying desperately to keep something away. He pressed one small kiss to her mouth.

"I love you so fucking much," he whispered against her lips. "And I'm telling you that as bad as this hurts right now, I won't let it stay like this forever."

She let her head drop exhaustedly to his shoulder, but her hand moved up from the frantic hold it had on his shirt, to drag lazily through his hair. Her tears were still falling but far less violent. They sat like that for so long that he wondered if she had fallen asleep. And he would sit like that all night if it meant that she would get a little bit of rest.

But when he heard a stifled yawn against his shoulder, he knew she was awake.

“Come on,” he said, helping her maneuver to the end of the bed so her head could rest on the pillow. He stood up so he could pull her shoes off before tucking her into the blanket. He toed off his own shoes next before crawling into bed beside her. She turned so she was laying on her side and tucked herself under his arm. She rested her head on his chest and attempted to line her breathing up with his.

They sat like that for a few minutes before she seemed to get her breathing to even out. After she was able to do that, after she was able to get a good gulp of air, he felt her melt a little bit further in him, relaxing as much as she could right now.

“I love you too,” she whispered. He knew it of course. It wasn’t her first time telling him. She had loved him for a long time, he’s quite sure. Just like he’s loved her. She’s showed it to him in more ways than he can count. But still, it was no less precious to hear it.

###

“Are you feeling better today, Uraraka?”

The tone was prickly, but she didn’t let it in. This time she had retrieved the pendant from her pocket as she sat down- keeping it out of sight but pressed to the palm of her hand.

She breathed in.

Then out.

She wasn’t alone.

That was why she could do this.

Aizawa was in the front row again, an ever-watchful eye on her.

Katsuki was waiting outside.

Her friends were at school.

No matter what, she knew that she wasn’t alone.

She knew that she was loved by...well, so many people.

"I am," she answered, surprising even herself with the strength of her

voice.

“Now, Uraraka,” he said. “I am curious. Why did it take so long for you to escape? If you were in fact there against your will, what made that specific day different?”

“They suppressed our quirks,” she said. “I...I wasn’t able to escape because I was not in control of my quirk. As for why it took so long, I didn’t get the idea until my handler...Mr. Tokayai...seemed specifically concerned about the state of my hands.” She tightened her hold on the pendant and looked over at the panel of judges. “I thought maybe it had something to do with the suppression of my quirk, so I sliced my hands open and found it. I...I didn’t get the idea until Mr. Tokayai reacted the way he did.” She turned back to the defense. “After that, the plan came quickly to me.”

The defense held her gaze for a moment- as if he was trying to weigh what question to ask next.

“Did you ever ask to be let out? Explicitly?”

She bristled. “Of course I did.”

“I don’t mean vague requests or voicing of discomfort- I mean did you ask to be let out and were forcibly kept?”

Ochako felt another sensation take hold of her- but this one- this one she could use. This one she could harness.

“Yes,” she said again, firmly and without hesitation. “I begged regularly to be let go. In fact, the first night I was rape...” he flinched at the word, but she didn’t. “I pleaded, on my knees, with Mr. Tokayia to let me go. Literally,” she said. “On. My. Knees. I told him I wanted to go home. I told him that I was only 16. That I had never even kissed anyone. And his exact words were...” this time she was the one staring down the defense, unflinching and without fear.

Dr. Shoko had told her to tell her story.

To tell her truth.

And not to let anyone bully her out of it.

She would do that.

“Rest those knees, girl...you don’t want to wear them out so early.”

She paused and let out a shaking breath. “So when I say that I asked, explicitly to be let go, that is what I mean. I did it often and clear.”

She found her voice- shaky though it may be, afraid as she was. She spoke unflinchingly- mincing no words.

It was an ugly truth- but it was the only one she had.

###

When it was over, it felt almost impossible to believe. There were more parts to the trial, something this complicated and big apparently included several steps. But Uraraka's part was over.

And she was standing.

Shota had many years of working as a hero; he had been through many sleepless nights and many days strung out on exhaustion.

And these past weeks (this past year) had been some of the worst of it.

And, for the first time in a long time, he felt something almost like rest as he settled into the backseat of this car, he was happy to soon be rid of. And, most importantly, maybe she could rest too.

He hadn't been surprised- not really. He had been impressed, but not surprised that Uraraka kept clawing her way out of hell.

He knew she would, even in the moments when he didn't. He had seen that potential in her first year.

She wasn't the surprise.

Now Bakugo...that had been a surprise, even for him. Granted he had always given Bakugo a little more credit than most, but this he had not been prepared for.

He had not foreseen any of this.

He had not expected for the explosive, winning-obsessed blonde to be almost...well, gentle.

Uraraka was passed out, exhausted against Bakugo's chest. His arm was slung protectively over her shoulder, encasing her and pressing her close to him.



As a rule, Shota avoided knowing too much about the romantic lives of his students. So far, no one had wound up pregnant, so- what more could he ask for?

But this one was curious, both the students involved and the odd nature of their relationship, some hybrid of deep friendship and dating that somehow made sense, as if either could stand on its own as the pillar of their connection.

The car jostled as it hit a dip, and Bakugo looked down, making sure that Uraraka had not been stirred awake, taking the time to kiss the top of her head in a flagrant display of doting that Shota was surprised he would indulge in front of a teacher.

“Got something you wanna say?” the blonde growled, noticing his teacher perhaps for the first time on this ride.

Shota rolled his eyes and closed them. “Not a thing,” he muttered tiredly, taking a cue from Uraraka and attempting to get some rest. “Not a damn thing, Bakugo.”

# Safe With Me

## Chapter Summary

Ochako considers next steps in her relationship with Katsuki. Katsuki worries about Ochako's involvement in a complicated case with her internship.

## Chapter Notes

Hello friends! Thank you for your patience with this one. I had some serious writers block with how to wrap up this story (still have one or two more chapters left :)), and a lot of family stuff going on, so I wasn't able to update as quickly as usual.

Thanks again to everyone for being patient and engaging so well with this story! It has truly made what has been a horrible year!

For the most part, people didn't talk about Ochako anymore. Voices didn't lower when she entered the room, and conversations didn't cease when she turned a corner. With only a few months left in her third year, finally, she felt as though she had found her equilibrium.

She had settled into a life that felt like it was hers.

She had wondered once if, maybe, every single day would be a battle; she had wondered if that would simply be her life forever. And now, with graduation a few months away, well into her work-study with Ryuko and with offers at several agencies in her inbox, she finally felt like she wasn't sprinting to catch up. She felt like she could stand next to any of her peers as a UA student, but, more importantly, as a hero.

People saw her as a hero- not as the weird girl from second-year who went missing for a few weeks and was all over the news for a few months after.

She was training.

Growing.

Flourishing in that way she had intended to at the beginning of her second year.

People didn't really talk about her anymore.

And that was fine by her.

But still, her ears couldn't help but perk up from where she was sat on the floor in the library. She could hear the loud chattering and giggling on the other side of the bookcase and then the distinct musing from a girl's voice:

"I don't know," the girlish voice said wistfully. "The other first years are a little...eh...But some of the upperclassman." She sighed dramatically, and Ochako heard the shuffle of books begin taken off the shelves. "Do you think that Bakugo fella likes younger girls?!"

And Ochako had to stifle her laugh into her arm lest she give away the fact that she was now inadvertently eavesdropping on their conversation. She wasn't upset at the girl's wondering- it was a fair enough question.

From the beginning of their second year to now, Katsuki had only continued to grow into himself. While his inner gremlin still made an appearance on occasion, no one who ever looked at him would doubt that he was every bit the hero he had always dreamed of becoming, age and maturity transforming his fragile ego into a far less fragile confidence.

And all of that had only served to make him impossible not to notice.

"Girl, don't even try it..." her companion said.

"What? Why?!"

"I already asked about him," she said. "He's obsessed with his girlfriend."

"Dammit, he has a girlfriend?"

"Oh yeah," she said. "She came in third at the Sport's Festival."

Damn right she did. It had been one of the best moments of her life, especially after missing out her second year. She had earned her spot on that podium next to Deku and Shoto.

"But really," continued one of them- though she was having trouble keeping track of who was talking. "I'm surprised he's in a relationship at all."

Rude.

She was just waxing about how hot he was.

“He’s so cranky and scowly...”

True.

“You would think if he was getting laid all the time that he would be in a better mood.” She heard their laughter further away than their voice had been as they moved further down the aisles, leaving Ochako sitting on the ground, legs tucked beneath her and a book opened in her lap.

Now other than the fact that she thought it was odd that the two first-years she had never spoken to were speculating about her sex life- or lack of a sex life. Now, Ochako wasn’t insecure about her relationship with Katsuki. And she wasn’t insecure about what a bunch of extras had to say about her, but still- they...they weren’t wrong.

Katsuki was- in fact- not getting laid.

Neither was she.

8 months into “officially” being his girlfriend, and there had been zero sex.

Orgasms? Yes.

Sex? No.

The closest they had ever gotten was the weekend she had turned 18. It had been a really good date for her birthday. She had felt hot as hell in the dress he had gotten her for Christmas, and, somehow, it had ended up pooled at her waist, giving him so many new places to explore.

That had been...

A good night.

A really good night.

Which she had assured him of over and over again after the fact.

But still, even if she theoretically had arrived at a place of being reasonably certain that she would want sex someday, the practice of it was something altogether different. The thought of it made her body ache, and her blood run cold with panic.

It felt so...

Invasive.

And even though it was Katsuki- even though she trusted him with her life- she wasn't sure how she was going to clear that particular hurdle, even if she wanted to.

She was still seeing Dr. Shoko twice a month, and things had been going well since the trial ended. She was thriving at her internship; she, finally, FINALLY, felt like she had caught up to her peers and wasn't always feeling dragged down.

But still, sometimes, the nagging insecurity crept into her mind that maybe she was keeping him away from something. The insecurity was there, but not the self-loathing- that, at least, was different. It had been a few tough talks with Shoko- a few nights spent sobbing in her room and on Katsuki's shoulder.

Shoko had told her over and over again that she never needed to give more than she could or she wanted.

And yes, that may one day mean having to let Katsuki go- something that was looking and feeling progressively more impossible- especially if Katsuki had anything to say about it. When she had confessed to him, in all her self-loathing and hurt that she was afraid she would never be able to be with him in that way, he had, of course, held her and hugged and assured her that it didn't matter.

"People don't die without sex, Cheeks," he had told her when she had stopped crying enough to listen to him.

"I know," she had said. "But you don't hold me back from anything, and I don't..."

He had growled into her hair, his grip around her waist tightening, pulling her closer to his chest. "How many fucking times do I have to tell you that there's not a damn thing you hold me back from, huh?" His tone was light but with an undercurrent of intensity, communicating that he wasn't angry with her but that he meant what he said. She let out a shaky breath and let herself fall into him, relaxing slightly. "I fucking love you, Ochako. And I'm not about to let that go over something so..."

"It's not stupid, Katsuki," she said, looking up at him briefly before snuggling back closer.

“I know,” he said defensively. “I just... I meant it’s not the most important thing, Cheeks. You are.” Ochako sighed and snuggled closer until they were a mess of limbs with no distinguishable separation.

She was about to tell him how sweet he was, how lucky she was to have him, when she heard him make an odd noise that stalled her sweet nothings.

“Sides,” he said with a shrug. “I have two perfectly good hands, after all.”

Despite her look of disgust, she snort-laughed into his shoulder and snuggled closer.

That had been about four months ago. And now, well, things weren’t different, but they were. She wondered for a moment if she should bring it back up to Katsuki. She had made peace with the fact that anything new, she would have to bring up. Even if it made her face flush red and made her buzz with nerves. She did it all the same- it was what made their relationship work. She knew she could bring it up to discuss, and she trusted he wouldn’t latch onto it with expectation, and he trusted that she would actually tell him what she wanted and not just what she thought would make him happy.

She closed her book and stood up from the library floor, straightening out her skirt before she made her way out of the library, feeling satisfied with her studying for the day. The sun was setting, and Katsuki would be getting back from his internship soon. It sucked- greatly sucked- that their days were almost in the opposite, but they still carved out times to be with each other, even if it was five minutes before curfew.

A curfew that, for the most part, they respected.

Usually...

###

When Katsuki arrived back from his internship, he was in a foul mood because the most pressing need that day had been a kitten stuck in a tree and a kid who got “lost” in the park. Except the kid had actually had been in the outhouse for an hour because he didn’t have enough fiber in his diet.

He hated dull days. Where the fuck were all the good criminals these days?!

His mood did lift when he opened the door to his dorm and found that Ochako had already made herself comfortable on his bed, already in her cozy pajamas, homework in her lap. It was cheesy- he knew- but he had accepted that was just a part of this whole “being in love with his favorite person and being loved by her”... *thing* . He didn’t make the rules, and he couldn’t help the fact that she lit up just a little when he entered a room, and it made him feel a wave of pride that he could make her day better just by being in the same room with her.

“Hey,” she greeted, holding out her hand. “How was your day?”

“Boring,” he pouted, falling face-first onto the bed beside her. She giggled and scratched the back of his head.

“That’s a good thing, Katsuki.”

“Tch...how am I supposed to be number one if I never face any actual villains?!”

She rolled her eyes and dragged her fingers through his hair in a soothing motion. “Yeah,” she said sarcastically. “Because that’s the problem with our class, not enough pre-graduation fieldwork.”

He snorted petulantly into his pillow. They sat in silence for another few seconds, her fingers continuing their relaxation ministrations against his scalp. They were both suckers for head massages, one of their favorite currencies for bets and challenges. Never mind that both would do anything the other asked them to do because, well, bets and competitions were both of their love languages.

*“If you don’t get a B on this test, Cheeks, then you owe me 15 minutes of head scratches.”*

*“If I pin you for 15 seconds, you have to give me a 30-minute head massage, Katsuki!”*

Her old competitiveness and determination and drive to win had come out full force in the past few months, and it was a damn sight to see as far as he was concerned.

“Katsuki?” He hummed non-committedly in response. “Uh...do you...do you think we should have sex?”

He tried not to respond in any obvious way, but he imagined that she noticed him go rigid for just a moment. Not because she had brought it up, he was used to her oddness now, used to the peculiar nature of their relationship.

Mainly because he was an 18-year-old guy.

And when his girlfriend wanted to talk about sex, some part of him responded to that.

“*Should ...*” he repeated her work, turning on his pillow to look at her. “Phrasing it that way ain’t exactly a good start, Cheeks.”

“I mean... I...” Katsuki bit back his own smirk as she attempted to sort through her words with all the finesse of an ostrich trying to ice skate. “I...is that...do you want to?”

He pushed himself up and turned onto his side so he could look up at her. “Of course I do,” he said. He could tell that she was waiting for him to continue, but he didn’t say anything else- he let it hang simply in the air.

She knew what he was doing.

He was good at this.

It was his way of being clear, without putting an expectation onto her- forcing her to have to actually open her mouth and say something. He saw the beginnings of a scowl forming on her face from his lack of response.

“Ugh, fine,” she said, though it came off more as a question than anything else.

“Okay,” he nodded, as if that were the end of it, pretending not to notice the way that she was turning into a blushing, flustered mess.

“Is that all?” she asked, her voice exasperated and annoyed as he looked up at her.

“Did you have another question?”

“No,” she said. “But I...I want to have a conversation!”

“Okay,” he said, sitting up, so he was no longer propped up on his fist and instead was leaning against the wall. “Then let’s have one.”



“But what if...what if I freak out?”

“When,” he asked. “Having the conversation or during sex?”

“Either,” she said with a shrug as she shifted back so that she was against the wall beside him, her homework abandoned beside her. “Both? I don’t know.”

Katsuki breathed out slowly, trying to walk that ever-elusive line of communicating to her clearly that yes, he absolutely wanted to have sex with her, and also it was okay if they didn’t. That she didn’t need to rush it. To remind her that this was about them and only them and not what was “supposed” to happen in a relationship.

“What if you do?” he asked.

She sighed and pulled her knees up to her chest and rested her cheek on them, and turned her gaze toward him- sweet and nervous but filled with that same unapologetic affection.

“It’ll be awkward.”

“I hear first-time sex is generally awkward,” he said with a shrug. “Kiri said his first time with Mina was...”

Ochako chuckled. “Oh yes, Mina told me too.”

He smirked down at her. “So yeah,” he said. Normally, we would say something about how much better they were than everyone else, so of course, they would rock at sex. Which, he had no doubt, eventually, they would (should it be something she wanted). But he also wanted to avoid putting pressure on her- the pressure to make sure it “rocked his world” the first time or the pressure that would make her feel like a failure if either of them didn’t quite get there on their first time.

She already had so much insecurity and uncertainty wrapped up in this for her.

“Look,” he said, draping a hand over her shoulder. “There’s still a few steps between where we are and sex.”

“Yeah,” she said with a small sigh. “I just...I’m already so slow-moving on so many things, I didn’t want...”

His eyes narrowed, frustration flickering to life in his chest. “Who the fuck told you that you were slow-moving?”

“No one,” she assured him. “No one actually said that. I just...I know...I think...I’m pretty sure it’s something I want, so should we just...do it and get it over with?”

He let out a bark of a laugh and raised a hand to her face, brushing his thumb along her bottom lip. “Wow,” he said. “You really know how to romance a fella, don’t you, Cheeks?”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she protested.

“No...no...” he said, holding up a hand to stop her protest. “That kinda talk will have me dropping my pants for you in a second.”

She smacked his shoulder. “Oh, shut-up,” she pouted. “Not like you are out here writing sonnets, Katsuki Bakugo!”

He rolled his eyes and tugged her closer, curling his body in over hers as he pulled her against him. She was biting her lip to try and keep her scowl in place. “I could write you a fucking sonnet, Cheeks,” he said.

“Liar,” she murmured against his lips.

“I could,” he insisted, brushing his lips over her jaw until she let her head fall back into his palm as he guided her back onto his bed. “I’d write you a whole-ass Shakespearean sonnet.”

“Hmmm...” she shifted beneath him so that she could drape her arms over his shoulders and run her fingers through the hair on the back of his neck. “Are you gonna compare my face to the moon, again?!”

His face turned red as the intrusive memory came screeching back into his consciousness the way it so often did when he was trying to fall asleep or have a moment’s peace with his own thoughts.

“OI,” he scolded. “You promised you would never bring that up again!”

She laughed happily- still his very favorite sound- and pulled him down for another kiss. “I never agreed to that, you asked me to, but I never agreed!”

“I was high!”

“I know,” she soothed teasingly. “You had such a bad reaction to that morphine!”

“Shut-up,” he growled into her neck while she continued to twirl his hair around her finger. “I did not.”

“You did,” she exclaimed, slapping his shoulder excitedly. “And it was adorable!” He moved back up to her mouth, hoping that dropping kisses there would end her dramatic retelling, but it seemed that she was committed to his. “I went to get you ice chips, and when I came back, you looked so relieved!”

“I did not!”

“You told me that you thought I was leaving and never coming back!”

“I did no such thing.”

She nuzzled his nose with hers and nodded. “You did,” she said in a sing-songy tone. “You said ‘Oh thank God, Cheeks. I thought that you left me because that punk-ass villain took me out, and you thought I was a loser now!’”

“It was a valid concern,” he said.

“And then you told me you hoped I never left you because I had cheeks like mochi and a face like the moon!”

He glared down at her. “And *this*,” he said, nipping lightly at her cheek. “...is why I don’t write you sonnets! I tried once, and look how you make fun of me!”

“Not making fun,” she said with a sweet smile. “It’s one of my favorite, most treasured memories.”

He rolled his eyes, but under the urging of her hands, let himself fall back down on top of her, resting his head on her shoulder while she played with his hair.

“Katsuki,” she said, her voice suddenly a little more serious but no less soothing. “We didn’t finish our conversation.”

“We can build to sex, Cheeks,” he said, into her shoulder. “There’s no rush; it’s whenever you’re ready.”

She shifted him slightly so he went up to his forearms and could look down at her so she could look him in the eyes. Her hand moving up to his cheek, her thumb brushing over his cheekbone in that tender way that she always took the time to do, like she somehow knew, even if

he had never got the guts to tell her, that he loved it.

“But are *you* ready?” she asked. He didn’t scold her. He knew this wasn’t her trying to force herself to do something just to please him. This was her doing what he sometimes failed to do- reminding him that there were two people in this relationship, and she wasn’t so fragile that he couldn’t tell her what he wanted to.

But she didn’t have to worry about it in this case.

“If you’re not,” he said, pressing his forehead to hers, “then I’m not. You being ready is one of the things that will make me ready, yeah?”

She smiled up at him, her cheeks round, sonnet-worthy, kissable, and begging to be bitten.

So he obliged, despite her playful screeches of protest.

###

Ochako’s mind was still buzzing from her conversation with Katsuki as she patrolled the not-so-mean streets, the voice of one of the sidekicks from Ryuko’s agency buzzing in her ear through the earpiece connected to her helmet. Uchiyama was a nice enough fellow, though, at times, he spoke to her as though he was a seasoned pro and not a sidekick who had been on the street for a year. Ochako didn’t consider herself an arrogant person, but if she had to bet, she’d say 70% of the students in her class had more experience in life-and-death situations than this guy. But still, he was nice and eager to teach.

And, to hear some of her friends talk about their internship, they were lucky to even get an email back from their supervisors.

So Ochako wouldn’t complain.

She offered answers to his questions as she patrolled- giving him the names of the streets she was on, reporting the activity (or lack thereof), and checking in to make sure that she was still, in fact, alive.

But between answering his questions and responding to any semi-suspicious noises, Ochako’s mind kept returning to that conversation, and her body and her emotions responded with excitement- anxiety? Yes. Uncertainty? Also, yes. But she couldn’t deny that she was excited

to start exploring that a little more intentionally.

Having the assurance of who Katsuki was, knowing that each step forward didn't have to mean another one, made it that much more fun to wonder, imagine, and consider what new facets of intimacy the two of them could explore...together.

It was a pleasant thought, as so many of her Katsuki-centered thoughts were.

One she couldn't help but smile at as she walked through downtown- the nightlife bustling bright and loud around her, but so far devoid of malicious intent. So far safe and quiet- so far happy and...

The scream interrupted her surveyance.

Screams and cries of protests. Ochako looked across the street where she saw a crowd of people stopped- couples on the streets, professionals leaving the office three hours late, tourists, and shoppers. They had gathered outside a hotel, terrified gazes pointed upward toward the whisp of a silhouette swaying precariously on the edge of a balcony, not so high to go unnoticed but certainly high enough to do some damage.

"Uravity?!"

"Sorry," she said as she got a running start toward the hotel. "We have a situation." She was certain another question was barked in her ear, but she had to concentrate right now. She had to aim her jump perfectly, so she didn't overshoot or send herself spinning into oblivion. As her foot left the ground in the beginnings of a jump, she activated her quirk on herself, eliminating a specific amount of her gravity, one she had practiced again and again to perfect her jump.

But it had never been a matter of life and death before.

The stakes had never been this high for her to get this jump right.

There was once a time that would have filled her with self-doubt and anxiety, but not this time. She wasn't the same Ochako or the same Uravity. That voice in her head telling her she could do this, that voice that used to sound like Katsuki and now was sounding a little bit more like hers, was louder than all her uncertainty as she launched herself into the air toward the falling body. Her lack of gravity propelling her through the air. Long limbs flailed, and hair whipped as the civilian passed through the air.

Ochako reached out her arms, ready to grab hold of the girl, to pull her close, canceling her gravity as well. As soon as her arms grab hold of the limp body, Ochako maneuvered herself into the air so that her body was between the girl and the stone wall of the hotel. She bent her knees as her feet made contact with the wall and used it to springboard herself back into the air.

She could hear the screams and cries of collective relief and fear as she shot back into the air, returning enough of her gravity that the two of them could land smoothly on the roof of the hotel. Ochako had crashed landed with this jump more than once, but not this time.

This time she landed with hard-earned ease, cradling the fallen girl to her chest to keep her from jostling.

Ochako went down onto her knees and looked at the girl in her arms, or woman; it was hard to tell. Ochako shifted closer to the edge of the building so that the city streetlights could illuminate her face. She was beautiful, with shiny black hair and rosy cheeks. She was a very slender girl, with long, thin limbs bent and splayed to the side. Her pink silk dress was drenched. She wasn't sure what it was, but the smell put her in mind of some alcohol and vomit mix.

Her head lulled side-to-side, her eyes flickering open and darted around, taking in her surroundings for a moment before her features twisted in pain, her red-painted bottom lip trembling as she started to shake her head.

"Hey," said Ochako, soothingly pressing down at her hair. "Hey, it's okay; you're safe."

"No," she protested, shoving weakly at Ochako's shoulder, but her arms slumped weakly back down, as though they were too heavy to hold up, when they fell limply back down, Ochako caught a brief glance of letters on the inside of her upper arm. "No...no...no..." tears squeezed from the corners of hers, dragging her eye-makeup with it down her cheek.

"I have you," Ochako assured, giving the girl another once over-noting for the first time the tracks on her arms and the bruising on her thighs. Ochako looked again at the tattoo on her arm.

"Matsumoto," she read out, looking back up at the girl's face. "Is...is that your name?"

"No, no, no," the girl moaned, shaking her head. "I'm...I'm...I'm

supposed...I'm supposed...I was going to get away. He was in the bathroom, and I was finally..." she let out a choked sob, and her eyes opened fully, wide-eyed and searching and something a little like betrayal as she looked at Ochako.

"Why...I...I was almost free." her voice was cracked, shattered, and a little too familiar. "Why didn't you let me die?"

###

When Ochako tried to let go of the girl's hand when the ambulance came, as she was about to be loaded onto the back of the rig, she found out the girl had a surprisingly good grip. When Ochako turned to look back at the girl, she saw that her wide, red-rimmed eyes were quivering with fear. The mistrust and betrayal that Ochako had seen leveled at her was back ten-fold and weighted with suspicion and distrust at the EMTs moving to help her.

"It's okay," said Ochako, attempt to retract her wrist. "These people are going to..."

"Noooo!" She thrashed and screamed and kicked wildly as one of them attempted to bring the oxygen mask to her mouth. "Nooo!" Her voice cracked at the ear-splitting pitch that it reached. "Don't do it! Don't do it! You're one of them! You're one of his, and you're going to send me back to him! You're going to send me...."

"Hey..." said Ochako, gripping the girl's forearm to let her know she was still standing beside her on the gurney. "Everyone here is here to help you..."

The girl pulled Ochako down to her face with shocking force, and Ochako could see up close in her frantic eyes that she wasn't going to be reasoned with. She had no idea where she was or who these people were.

"They...are...going...to...kill me," she said. "F-for trying to escape."

She was in fight or flight; her shaking body and the deep paranoia-based fear in the girl's eyes were all too familiar to Ochako, something she knew and felt deep in her soul. Ochako didn't pull her hand away from the girl but pulled away just a bit, looking the girl in the eyes as she brushed her thumb over the girl's racing pulse.

"Okay," said Ochako with a small nod. "Okay. What if I come with you?" The girl's brow furrowed, clearly unconvinced, as her eyes

shifted back to the EMTs. "I will make sure that no one hurts you, okay?"

"Don't let...don't let them put me to sleep," she begged. "Please don't let them put me to sleep. I'll wake up, and I'll be back with him. He won't let me escape. He'll...He'll be looking for me, and he'll find me. I'm his, and he will never let me leave. He told me that he would never let me leave."

"Okay," said Ochako. "I won't let them put you to sleep, okay? I won't let anyone put you under, but this..." Ochako reached for the mask that the EMT was attempting to put over her face. "This won't put you to sleep." Ochako held the mask up to her face and inhaled. "This is oxygen," she said. "It's all it is. It won't do anything to you."

The girl watched Ochako take another breath, her eyes fixed on the mask before, finally nodding. Ochako slowly, carefully, brought the mask down toward the girl's face. "Okay," said Ochako, her voice calm and low. "It's almost there, so I'm about to touch you. Just remember, just take deep breathes." The girl nodded again and closed her eyes, and took a couple of deep breathes.

"See," said Ochako, running her fingers over the back of the girl's hands. "See...just oxygen. That's it. I want to help you. I want to help you."

"You can't help me," she choked out. "You can't help me. No one can help me." Ochako could hear the girl's voice rising, the panic, the feeling of being closed in on, and Ochako felt a stab of pain and empathy at the sight.

"I can help you," said Ochako. "I am going to help you." She spoke it with certainty- with the same certainty that she had done that jump, when she had saved this girl from her fall. The fall she had taken on purpose.

A fall Ochako had seen before.

Ochako had been caught when she was falling.

And Ochako would spend the rest of her life making sure she did the same thing.

"I know you're afraid," said Ochako. "And that's okay." Ochako tightened her grip on the girl's hand and looked at her, resolute and certain and strong. "But you're with me, now, okay?" The girl looked



her over as if trying to assess if that was a good thing. Ochako would show her that it was.

“You’re with me,” she repeated. “So, you’re safe.”

###

By the time Ochako reconnected with Uchiyama, got the girl to the hospital, gave her report to officers and to Ryuko, she was well past curfew and, currently, had no intention of leaving. Not until she was sure that the girl was safe. And she had no idea how long that would actually take.

They didn’t have a name yet.

She had refused to give it.

Not to her and not anyone.

No one recognized the name tattooed on her arm.

“Not tattooed,” the doctor told her while she had done the exam. “A burn.” Ochako had tried to leave for the exam to give the girl her privacy, but she hadn’t let go of her hand since Ochako climbed into the back of the rig with her.

Eventually, she had calmed down enough for a sedative, and her clothes were collected so that the different fluids stained could be tested.

The doctors guessed she was anywhere from 16 to 18, but it’s difficult to say for certain.

She told the doctors, when she was able to speak, that it was an accident. That she had been drunk and stupid and got too close to the edge. No one called her on the blatant lie.

She refused to give her name, and when they told her that her picture would be circulating soon, she scoffed and said that no one would be looking for her anyway. There was once a time when Ochako would have held the girl's hand told her that wasn't true- assured her that someone was looking for her.

But Ochako knew now the privilege in that statement, a privilege that she knew was not universal. So, all Ochako assured her, all she could

assure her, is that she wouldn't be alone now. That she would be safe *now* .

Ochako knew that there would be more detectives, more police, more heroes tomorrow, many much more competent and formidable than Ochako, but all the same, before the girl fell asleep, the sedatives and medicine finally doing their job, she looked up at Ochako and begged her, voice pleading, "Please, don't leave me."

"I won't," Ochako assured her- totally unaware if whether that was a promise that she was able to make but once she intended to keep either way.

"Uravity."

She looked up as Ryuko entered the room. Ochako looked at the fitfully sleeping girl in the bed beside her and stood to meet her in the doorway.

"Any news?" she asked.

Ryuko shook her head. "Matsumoto is a very common name," she said. "And it's not tied to any known big criminals."

"What does that mean?"

Ryuko looked past Ochako briefly and then back to her. "It means we keep hunting- we talk to some of our informants, detectives are talking to everyone at that hotel and trying to find out what room she was in, and, hopefully, after a little time to recover, she'll be willing to talk to the police tomorrow."

Ochako nodded, biting nervously at her lip. "I...I don't think I can leave."

Ryuko nodded. "I expected as much," she said. "I had Ushiyama pick up your personal effects from the agency so that you could have your phone and a change of clothes. I have also had someone contact Eraserhead to inform him as well."

Ochako nodded in relief before bowing. "Thank you so much. I appreciate the understanding."

"Of course," she said. "You did well today, Uraraka. You saved her life, and she trusts you. I have no doubt that you will continue to be helpful in this case."

After the pro-hero saw herself out, Ochako looked down at her phone and nervously turned it on. It was 1 am, so she had no doubt that more than one of her classmates had bombed her phone with text messages and voicemail. She hoped Aizawa had informed her more... *insistent* ...friends that she was fine.

She looked down at her screen and saw several text messages from Shoto, Deku, Iida, and Mina, along with 8 missed calls from Katsuki. But she assumed from the lack of calls made in the past hour that Aizawa had, in fact, told them that she had been detained on patrol.

She went ahead and hit call, still lingering in the doorway of the girl's room so that she could keep her eyes on her and keep her promise not to leave her. The phone rang one and a half times before she heard the click of his answer.

"About damn time, Cheeks."

She rolled her eyes and smirked into her phone. "Good to hear from you too, Katsuki." She heard shifting in the background and then a tired groan. "Did I wake you?"

"No," he answered, though she imagined his body had been begging him to fall asleep. "I was awake and waitin' on you. Are you okay?"

"I am," she said. "I am still at the hospital."

"The hospital?!"

Shit. She was tired; her brain and mouth were not connecting. "Not for me," she assured him. "I'm fine! It's a girl I helped out on patrol." She looked over her shoulder into the room once more before stepping out into the hallway, still visible if she were to open her eyes but far enough that she could lower her voice with the certainty that she wouldn't be heard. "I think she's in trouble, Katsuki. Like a big kind of trouble."

He made a noise on the other end, letting her know she was listening. "Are you coming back soon?"

Ochako ran her hand through her hair. "I...she's kinda latched onto me," she explained. "I don't want to leave her until she's a little bit more stable."

She braced herself for some kind of scolding from Katsuki- some expression of worry or a slap on the wrist.

“Do you need anything from me?” The tone of his voice was serious and intense, in that way that let her know he meant anything from bringing her food or her homework to coming up to wait with her if she needed that.

“No, Katsuki,” she assured him. “I’m good for now, but I promise I’ll let you know if I do.”

He grunted in acceptance of her answer. “I’ll see you tomorrow, though, yeah?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I’ll be back for class.”

“All right,” he said. “Try and get some sleep.”

“I will...” she hoped. She was starting to feel the wear and tear of the day. “I love you.”

“Love you,” he said, his own sleepiness making his voice rattle pleasantly in her ear. After she hung up, she made her way back into the room, standing for a moment over her bed. She was asleep now, but her face did not look restful. She was holding tension in her brow and fear in the corners of her mouth. And it was all Ochako could do not to reach out and take her hand.

It had helped Ochako, but she didn’t know that it would help this girl.

Ochako just hoped she was getting even a little rest. She hoped that tomorrow she would be a bit more alert and a little more prepared to talk. Ochako knew how hard that could be too, and she knew it was important not to force her, but if she was in trouble, if there were other young girls like this one that we're in trouble, they may not have much time at all.

Ochako knew it was a delicate balance- balancing the more significant needs, the bigger players and pictures that may be at play, with the needs of this one.

This one girl.

This one, lonely girl.

Ochako settled into the uncomfortable chair beside her bed.

For now, this was the only need that mattered to her.

###

Katsuki wasn't needy- he really wasn't. And dammit, he wasn't clingy despite what Kiri said! He just liked to know things! So sue him if he wanted to know where his girlfriend was. He knew she was capable. He knew she was badass. But he would also like to know that she wasn't dead in a ditch somewhere.

He didn't consider that clingy.

He considered that normal Katsuki behavior.

And he wasn't clingy for waiting outside of her room for her to finish changing out of yesterday's clothes and walk her to class with a banana and a cereal bar in his pocket. It wasn't just that he wanted to see her! It was about keeping her well-fed for the day.

And so what if the way she smiled at him, all tired but no less excited to see him, made him feel all warm inside. It meant they had a good healthy relationship, dammit. And he did everything good and healthy (except for processing his complicated feelings with childhood rival and his detrimental desire to be number one).

"Good morning," she said, hugging him tight and wiggling her face against his shirt, wrinkling it- he was certain- but he doesn't have the energy to care about that. When she let go, she looked up at him expectantly.

"What the fuck is that face for?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

She jutted her bottom lip out a bit more, still looking up at him, knowing he knew exactly what she wanted. He rolled his eyes and moved to drop a kiss to her lips, only for her to back away last minute.

"Breakfast, Katsuki," she said with a smirk. "What did *you* think that I wanted?!"

He growled at her and tried to turn and walk down the hall- taking her breakfast with him for being such a brat- but she threw her arms around his neck demandingly. "No, Katsuki," she protested loudly. "I was just joking!"

"Nope," he said, stepping back away from her. "Now you get no kiss and no breakfast! Doesn't pay to be a smartass, does it?!" But she clung tight to his neck, even as he straightened his body fully, taking

her slightly off the ground as she refused to relinquish her grip around his shoulders.

“Nooo,” she wailed pathetically, letting her head fall back beseechingly. “I want both! I had a long night! I need smooches and breakfast!”

“Would you keep it down?” he scolded, looking down the hall to see if any nosy neighbors stuck their head out to see what was causing all the ruckus, but it seemed most of them had already made their way down for breakfast and class. She dropped back down to her feet, and this time when he went in to kiss her- she didn’t pull away.

He had meant for it to be a quick, chaste kiss. But when he tried to pull away, she held on, deepening the kiss. It wasn’t particularly passionate, but it felt incredibly intimate like she was craving just his closeness as her hand gripped tighter to the fabric of his shirt, keeping him in place.

He didn’t know anything really about why she had stayed the night at the hospital or the nature of the case other than Ochako’s speculation that the girl was in some kind of trouble. He doubted that Ochako knew for certain. But she was undoubtedly feeling something from the case- picking up on something in her body and heart that kept her holding onto him, trusting that he would hold onto her.

Always a safe bet.

When she did pull away, she went back flat onto her feet and nestled against his chest for a few more minutes.

“I missed you,” she said.

“Tch...you were gone for a night.”

She shrugged. “I still missed you.”

He pressed one last kiss to the top of her head and jostled her a little bit. “Come on, Cheeks,” he said, holding up her breakfast. “Let’s get our asses to class.” She nodded and took the banana happily, peeling it as they walked down the hall together, his arm thrown over her shoulder. “We’re already gonna look suspicious as hell showing up late together.”

Ochako rolled her eyes. “Aizawa knows where I was last night.”

“Mmhhh...think that will keep the extras from making all those obnoxious noises when we come in?”

She smiled and took a bite of her banana, looking up at him with full cheeks and tired eyes as she chewed it. “I’ll just glare at them, and that will shut them up!” She demonstrated said glare, but it was slightly undercut by the bulging cheeks and banana that hadn’t quite made it past her lips and into her mouth.

He reached up and wiped it away with his thumb. “Uh-huh, that’ll do it.”

They beat Aizawa to class, and that was all that mattered. She kissed him once more before going to her desk, and he found himself regretting that they had opted not to be *that* couple and kept their desks on opposite sides of the classroom.

Because he had missed her too, and he could read something in that kiss that wasn’t all her just being totally, and 100% taken with his smooth-words and his masculine wiles. She hadn’t held to him like that in a few months. The last time had been after a tough day at therapy when she was coming down from the adrenaline and “closure” of the trial.

That night, she had told him that she felt like she had no idea who she was.

“I had never wanted this- all of this- to define me,” she had told him. “I had wanted the opposite of it for so long, and now I...and now that this big part of it is over I...I don’t know who I am anymore.”

It made perfect sense to him, and it was something, he assumed, would pass with time. But at the moment, she had felt weightless and untethered, and she had held onto him like he was the only thing keeping her rooted to the earth. He had held her until she found her own footing again. And he was right; days passed, then a week, then a month, as she reconnected and reshaped herself all over again.

Integrating was what her psychiatrist said.

And this morning, for a few seconds, she had held to him like that again.

In his brief stolen glances, she seemed fine- tired, sure, but that wasn’t new for any of them- but she seemed to be her normal self which quieted his mounting nerves. He wasn’t sure where those nerves were

coming from, but he had good instincts. He had excellent instincts in life and impeccable instincts when it came to Ochako, and he couldn't seem to shake this bad feeling.

And when Aizawa came into their English class and asked her to come with him, it was all he could do not to stand up and follow her. He spent about 15 useless minutes in class, unable to focus on Mic's words until his phone vibrated in his pocket.

He took it out and looked down at the screen.

***I'm okay, Katsuki! Ryuko wants me to go back to the hospital and see if I can't help get the girl to cooperate. Text you an update soon!***  
**<3**

He put his phone back in his pocket and took a quick breath. He needed to focus. She had this- whatever it was- she had this, he had no doubt about that.

###

"I thought it was a modeling job..."

Maria Morales' voice was lower than it had been yesterday, deeper and more gravely. Ochako wondered if it was her real voice.

"It...it was supposed to be a modeling job." Ochako could see her lip shake with emotion from where she sat beside her on the edge of the bed.

She was talking- finally.

When Ochako had arrived at the hospital, she could hear the panicked screams and frantic cries from down the hall. When she got to the hospital room, Maria was out of her bed, wielding her bedpan like a weapon against the doctors and the detectives in the room.

She didn't recognize any of them, and maybe that helped. Perhaps it also helped that she wasn't afraid as she ordered them to leave the room until Maria calmed down. When Ochako had finally been able to get Maria back into her bed, she demanded- for the love of God- that they get a woman detective in the room too.

Ochako knew that wasn't the end all be all, she knew it wouldn't



make everything better, and she knew that women were capable of horrible things, just like men. But she also knew that she herself had noticed the lack of women involved in her own case every step of the way- save for Dr. Shoko. She had found herself, more than once, wishing that there was someone with her that could maybe comprehend how vulnerable she felt.

When she made the request, she must have done it with the confidence of a pro because no one seemed to question it, and ten minutes later, Detective Kanazuki arrived, ready to lead the questioning ahead of her male colleagues in the interview.

Twenty minutes later, the girl finally shared her name as she clung to Ochako's hand, and now as her grip tightened, she said those words in a voice trembling with shame.

"It was supposed to be a modeling job, and I had just run away from home, and I...I needed money. They paid for me to fly out to Japan, and...and before I knew what happened, I was on an auction block being sold."

"To Matsumoto?"

She shook her head. "No...I...that guy was someone else who bought me Amakusa, I think was his name." Maria looked around the room.

"Have...have you found him yet?"

"No," said Detective Kanazuki. "He used an alias when he checked in, and we can't seem to track him down, so..."

"You won't be able to," said Maria, shaking her head. "Matsumoto has already taken care of him, I'm sure."

Detective Kanazuki looked up briefly from where she was taking notes. "Why do you think that is?"

"That's what you agree to when you buy one of Matsumoto's girls. You get the cleanest and best and most beautiful girls; you take on the responsibility of the product. If you get bored with your girl, you have to promise to return her to Matsumoto."

Ochako felt her stomach clench at the way Maria spoke of it.

"Why is that?"

“To make sure we don’t talk,” she said while tightening her grip around Ochako’s hand to almost bone-crushing levels. “I heard stories of girls who ran from their buyers, and Matsumoto always found a way to kill them before they could talk to anyone. It’s so..., so no one catches them- so no one can track them down.” Maria looked up at them. “I’m sure they killed my buyer before he had a chance to talk to you all.” She chewed on her already bleeding lip. “And he’ll come for me too. I know it. I... I’m gonna die just like him.” She looked toward Ochako, and Ochako felt her own heart shatter a little at the look in her eyes, at the desperate hope and fear. “I know... I know I jumped but as soon as I did, I wanted to take it back.” Her breath quickened, and her words squeezed out past the puffs of air that seemed only to catch in her throat. “I... I don’t want to die. I don’t want to, but he’s going to find me.”

Ochako scooted back on the bed, so she was aligned with Maria, so she could turn and look her in the eye. “Maria,” she said, interrupting her panicked rambling. “Maria, just breathe, okay? Can you pause and take a breath?”

Maria nodded and obeyed, drawing in a sharp breath.

“Again,” said Ochako, pressing her fingers in a regular pattern against the palm of Maria’s hand. “And again.”

By the third breath, it was a bit fuller, and more of it seemed to reach her lungs.

“Listen,” said Ochako. “We are all here to protect you. You made it to us. You did the hard part and now let us protect you and all the other girls that Matsumoto has, okay?”

Ochako waited for her words to register with Maria. She knew they wouldn’t be enough on their own; she knew the girl’s fear was jackhammering in her chest, flowing through her blood and sinking into her marrow- making room for nothing else.

But perhaps, in this moment, Ochako’s words could reach her- to let her know for the briefest of moments that she is not alone, that she wasn’t going to do any of this alone.

Not while Ochako was a hero.

Not while she had any kind of strength in her.

Maria drew in a trembling breath and nodded, a small, almost

imperceptible movement, before she started speaking again.

She spoke of the other girls with her.

“All girls,” she said. “All without quirks,” she added. “They never wanted to risk us getting the upper hand or fighting our way off?”

She described her treatment after being abducted. “It actually wasn’t awful,” she said. “I mean, I couldn’t leave when I wanted, which is terrible on its own, but they fed us well; they kept us clean and well-groomed; they gave us pretty comfortable beds to sleep in.” She let out a small, bitter laugh. “I guess they wanted to preserve the integrity of the product. It’s why he can charge so much for us.”

Ochako nodded. She knew that made little difference when you were a captive, bought and sold against your will, but all the same, she was glad to know that the girls that were waiting on them to act were not currently being starved and beaten and frozen in a cage.

“But the guy who bought me he...” she shuddered. “He was bad.” She nodded and tugged harshly at her hair. “He was scary and mean and just...” She swallowed and looked at Ochako. “Is it bad that I don’t care if Motsumoto’s people got to him and killed him?”

Ochako shook her head. “No, Maria,” she said. “Nothing you could feel about him or anyone else who did this to you is wrong, okay? You could miss someone, or you could be wishing them all a slow painful death, and all of it would be valid, okay?”

Maria nodded again, drawing some strength from the assurance and continuing her story, what was left of it at least.

“...I don’t even know if Matsumoto is a real person,” she said. “Or just the group that trafficked and sold us? Or a boss? I don’t know.”

Any could be true, though she very much doubted that Matsumoto was a real name if he was bold enough to burn it into the arm of the girls he kidnapped. It was a moniker, a calling card, a way to make his or her business known without revealing an identity.

It was a brand...a brand in dealing and selling in human bodies.

Ochako steadied her own escalating heart rate with slow, even breathes, squeezing and unfurling her toes inside of her shoes in a grounding, rhythmic motion that rooted her in her body again, empathizing enough to be present with Maria and distancing herself

enough to protect herself.

Just like Dr. Shoko had told her.

By the time the detectives finished with their initial interview, Maria was exhausted and frayed. Once again, she asked for Ochako to stay with her a little longer.

“Just until I fall asleep,” she asked.

“I’ll stay as long as you want,” said Ochako.

She smiled as she let her eyes fall closed. “Just until I fall asleep,” she said, her eyes briefly opened again, as if to check and make sure Ochako hadn’t run away in that time. “You’ll be back tomorrow, right?”

Ochako didn’t know if she was allowed to. If she was supposed to. She had other things she needed to work on, other responsibilities that required her attention. She had school and her internship and friends and Katsuki.

But somehow, none of that seemed to matter right now.

“I will,” Ochako answered- knowing somehow, somehow she would make that happen.

###

Ochako waited until she was sure that Maria was asleep before she stood to let herself out, having long ignored the aching hunger in her stomach. She took a moment to appreciate how far she had come in that regard. Even before she had been abducted- she had learned to ignore hunger pangs, and after her abduction, she hardly noticed the hallow rattling inside of her.

Now, thanks to her own health and Katsuki’s cooking, her relationship with food had fundamentally changed- even compared to herself three years ago. She had learned to stop seeing food from a place of scarcity, now eating whenever she was hungry without guilt.

Speaking of- she should call Katsuki and let him know that she was hungry. Although, it was probably a safe assumption that he had

already set aside a plate for her in the fridge. But all the same, she wanted to hear his voice.

She stepped out into the hallway and lingered a few doors down by an empty room as she waited for Katsuki to answer, which he did with his same grumpy grunt.

“Hello to you too,” she said with a smirk.

“That was a hello, dammit!”

“Is that your hello for your sweet, angel girlfriend?”

“Yes,” he said. “If it were anyone but you, I would have said ‘the fuck do you want?’.”

“You literally say that to me at least once a week.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Keep up the third degree, and it’ll be five times a week!”

She laughed and leaned up against the wall. “I’m heading home soon,” she said. “Will I get to see you?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ll meet you in the kitchen and heat up a plate of food for you.”

She smiled happily to herself. “Thank you,” she said, a yawn chasing her words. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Yeah,” he said. “See ya. Just text me when you’re close.”

After Ochako hung up the phone, she shouldered her bag and took a couple of steps toward the elevator. But something in her stopped her forward motion, an awareness settling around her that sometimes settled over her in her training simulations.

Something was wrong.

Aizawa told them that it wasn’t a super-power; it wasn’t a quirk; it was just time and experience and being close to death more often than not that honed that specific sixth sense of when danger was close by.

He told them to listen to it.

It was that sense that had told her that she needed to go find Tsu, all those months ago; that sense that had kept her alive; that sense that

had been so wrecked that she hadn't been sure if she would ever trust it again.

There was once a time when everything felt like life and death- even sitting in class with her trusted peers.

But she had started to listen to it again.

And right now, those instincts that had brought her this far were firing off, telling her that danger was nearby.

She spun on her heels and went back to Maria's room at a quickened pace. There was someone in the room, a woman, dressed in scrubs. She was bent over Maria's bed, holding a syringe.

"Who are you?" asked Ochako before she could second guess herself.

It may just be a nurse. Ochako hadn't seen this one yet, but she also knew, practically, she didn't know every nurse in the hospital. But still, her suspicions were aroused, and her senses were on a high alert.

"Oh," she said, looking up. Ochako's eyes zeroed in on the needle that was inches away from Maria's vein. "I'm just the night nurse here to administer her meds."

"What meds?" asked Ochako, stepping into the room. Ochako knew there was a chance she was making an ass of herself, but she didn't stop to think about that. She would rather come off as an ass than be "polite" and let something happen to Maria.

The nurse narrowed her eyes. "I am not allowed to share the medical information of a patient." She moved to insert the needle, but Ochako was across the room in a second, holding her wrist.

"Can I see your badge?" she asked.

The nurse's dark eyes narrowed into a glare as she jerked her hand calmly away from Ochako's grip. "A patient threw up on me, and I had to change," she said. "I left my badge on my scrub top by mistake, but..."

"Then I insist," said Ochako, trying to crowd the woman away from the bed. "That you call another nurse to confirm the medication and..."

“I will not let a child tell me how to do my job,” the woman spat, her voice laced with righteous indignation. If Ochako was wrong and this was just a night nurse doing her job, Ochako wouldn’t grudge her that indignation. But she wanted proof first.

“Just go and get the head nurse,” said Ochako. “Easy as that.”

“Or I could give my patient their medication *right* now,” she growled. “How about that?”

Ochako shook her head resolutely. “Get out of the way!”

The nurse moved with alarming and skillful speed and attempted to shove Ochako away, but Ochako could see her movement coming, could read the trajectory of her body. Ochako’s hand shot out once again, manacled the woman’s outstretched wrist.

Ochako’s suspicion was only confirmed that this was, in fact, not a nurse when a hard fist connected with Ochako’s jaw. Against someone else, someone who wasn’t a hero, that likely would have been enough to send her crashing to the floor.

But she was a hero.

And she got hit harder than that when she sparred with Katsuki.

Ochako took her chance to activate her quirk on the woman and fling her into the air.

“What the hell is this?” snarled the woman. “Let me down, you bitch.”

Ochako picked up the dropped syringe and brought it up to her face; behind her, Maria had stirred awake, either from the punching or the screaming.

“No,” said Ochako. “I don’t think I will.” She turned to look at Maria, who had thrown herself, panicked from the bed, and was squatted on the other side. “Maria,” she said. “Everything’s okay,” she assured. “Would you please hit the call button on your bed?”

Maria stood shakily, her eyes focused on the woman floating against the ceiling, who was flailing about as though she could shake off the impact of her quirk.

That wasn’t going to happen.

Soon there was a nurse, followed by security, and soon more police

officers to escort the angry, snarling woman away.

“Well,” observed one of the detectives as they made arrangements for security through the rest of the night. “At least we know now that she isn’t paranoid.”

Ochako bit back her own scoff (Katsuki was becoming a bad influence on her). “I never thought she was paranoid,” she said.

That was the problem in cases like this. The people, sometimes the children, are traumatized, their perception of safety completely rocked. And that needed to be taken seriously- no matter what.

Katsuki always took her fear seriously.

Shoko always took her fear seriously.

And half the time, that was all she needed.

Speaking of Katsuki- she needed to make another phone call.

###

By the time Ochako arrived back at the dorms, it well past midnight. Over the last few months, Katsuki had gotten back into his healthy habit of going to sleep before ten. Sure, before Ochako, his bedtime had been 8:30 pm.

But, he supposed, that compromise was a part of every relationship.

Now he typically fell into bed at 9:30 pm.

Like some kind of hooligan.

This was his first time staying up past midnight in several months. Ochako had told him to go to bed, that she would reheat her plate when she got in before dragging her ass to bed.

One, he didn’t believe she would. She would go to sleep without dinner, which was unacceptable to Katsuki.

Two, when she had called him the first time, he could hear the tightness in her voice, the worry and the anxiety, despite her attempt to remain upbeat.

So he waited up for her in the common area- studying, reading, and now, watching shitty late-night T.V. When he heard the door creak



open, he switched the T.V. off and stood up to move to the kitchen. Mid-stride, she froze him in her reprimanding gaze.

“Katsuki,” she sighed. “I told you that you didn’t need to wait up for me!”

He shrugged. “I know I didn’t have to.” He padded across the living room and toward the fridge. He could hear Ochako dropping her bag at the door and the clatter of her shoes flying to the side as she shuffled behind him. He bent down to grab the covered plate, and when he shut the kitchen door, he felt the press of her cheek between his shoulder blades and the grip of her arms around his torso.

“Come on,” he said, patting the back of her hand, letting her know that he was moving toward the microwave. She didn’t detach herself; she just shuffled behind him, keeping her grip around him and her face buried in his back.

He dropped one of his hands to cover hers as he put the plate in the microwave. For a moment, the only sound was the hum of the microwave.

“Long day,” he observed.

“Yeah...”

He didn’t push. She never pushed him, and it usually took more than a few cuddles and a plate of dinner to get him to open up, so he could be patient. When the microwave beeped, he removed the plate and walked with her over to the couch.

She hummed happily, inhaling the food and letting her head drop against his shoulder for a moment.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

He grunted in response and motioned toward the plate. “Eat it while it’s hot.”

She smiled up at him before diving into the plate of food, sighing contentedly and making her regular noises of appreciation. He heard them regularly, but they never failed to stroke his ego and make him feel like the best damn boyfriend in the world.

He draped his arm across the back of the couch and let her settle against him as she balanced her plate on her knees.

“This is yummy, Katsuki,” she said.

“Of course it is.”

She glared up at him. “Thank you is also a customary response to a compliment.”

“Thank you? I made you dinner!”

“I already said thank you...” she pouted, taking a big bite. She yawned and stretched out her legs in front of him, taking another mouthful that made him roll his eyes. He supposed her chipmunk cheeks made bigger bites possible, but still, she was gonna choke on her food one day! He resisted the urge to poke at her cheeks and let her finish her meal in peace.

“You really didn’t have to stay up, Katsuki,” she said, as she put the empty plate on the coffee table and turned, so she was facing him on the couch, draping her legs over his as she leaned up against the arm of the sofa. “But I’m glad you did!”

“I wasn’t tired anyway,” he said, covering her ankles with his hands and pressing his thumb into the top of her foot.

She made a skeptical noise, but she laid back against the arm of the couch as his thumb moved to press into the arch of her foot, pulling the tension of her body with practiced ease. That was all that she needed, and soon she was telling him about her day.

About Maria.

About the case.

About what she had been through.

His fingers never stopped squeezing and rubbing against her feet, up her ankles, and to her calves, massaging into her muscles in a way that made her flinch and then sigh as she adjusted to the pressure.

Part of it was for her because it relaxed her and let her fall easy into the cushions, even as she shared the heaviness of her day with him.

But it was also for him- because he liked touching her and because he needed something to do with his hands. Even as he had become an expert in comforting Ochako, he still preferred the clarity of doing, of acting. He was a physical being, after all.

And his own anxiety was mounting with every word.

Every detail she revealed about the case made his own body tense with stress.

He loved her. He loved her so much. He loved her courage. He loved her heart. He loved how open she was, despite everything she had been through. But her father's words shifted to the front of his mind as he listened to Ochako share her worry about Maria and all the girls like her; the words he had spoken to Katsuki, trembling with emotion and worry.

*"Because she loves so much and so completely. She gives and protects without a safety net. And as hard as that was before, it was even more hellish after all she went through."*

And a slowly creeping dread wormed its way into his brain as he listened to her.

Listened to how she would be back there tomorrow.

How she would be talking to Ryuko about the case in the morning.

About how she was going to do whatever she could to support Maria.

And it took every last bit of his self-control not to ask her if she was sure that this was a case that she needed to be so involved in. She wasn't even a year away from her own traumatizing trial, and here she was, wanting to throw herself into something else, something a stone's throw away from her own trauma that was on the road to healing, no doubt, but was certainly not completely healed yet.

But he kept the question to himself.

For now.

Right now, he just needed to listen to her talk, and help her process her day, and remind her what a badass she was for knowing that the "nurse" was, in fact, not a nurse.

She was a badass, after all. If anyone was aware of that, it was him.

But still...something about all of this wasn't sitting right.

"And you're okay?" he asked, tugging on her legs so that she was closer to him, so he could look her in the eye and weigh her response.

She bit her lip and thought for a moment- he could see the wheels in his head-turning. At least she was considering the answer and avoiding a knee-jerk reaction of assuring him that she was fine. "Actually," she said. "Actually, I'm okay. I'm worried about Maria," she said. "I don't want any of this to be put on the back-burner when there are girls like her out there who still need saving."

She was a hero, after all.

Of course she wanted to save them.

He shouldn't- *couldn't* - get in his feels when she talked about wanting to save people when that was literally their whole damn job.

"It won't be," he said, tugging on her knees until her body was completely turned toward him. "You're a pain in the ass, and you won't let it."

"Tch..." she was getting too good at that. "No ones gonna listen to me!"

"Sounds like they did," he said. "Multiple times, in fact. Fuck, you saved that kid's life, Cheeks; they damn well better listen to you!"

She shrugged. "I guess."

He grabbed her chin and tipped her face up toward him so he could lean in toward her, his nose brushing against hers. "They'll listen to you," he said. "Make them listen to you. If you have a thought, an instinct, an opinion- or any of that- you should tell them, Ochako." Despite his trepidation about the whole nature of this case and the way Ochako was throwing herself it, he also wouldn't let her talk herself out of it. He wouldn't let her doubt her ability to do this.

This wasn't about her ability.

Certainly not for him.

"Thanks, Katsuki," she said, rubbing her nose against his before pressing a sweet soft kiss to his lips and settling back against his shoulder.

That night, neither of them made it up to their rooms. Katsuki wasn't sure which one of them had decided that this was where they would rather spend their night, but neither of them made a move to get up, and eventually, he was laying on his back, Ochako nestled between

his legs and her head resting on his chest.

Still a place of safety and security for her.

And for him, if he was being honest.

One of his hands moved up and down, dragging his fingers along her back, and the other was buried in her hair, cradling her head to him.

He reminded himself that she was still a student. They wouldn't let her do anything too dangerous on this case. Right now, she was just showing up as support for Maria, and, honestly, there was no one who could provide that like Ochako.

Her empathy and experience had already given her insight into the case that others might not have at all.

He let out a long sigh, trying to relax into the press of her body against his. Reminding him that she was here.

She was here.

She was with him.

She was safe.

# In Her Corner

## Chapter Summary

The pros and detectives collaborate on a mission to take down the trafficking syndicate. Katsuki and Ochako have a miscommunication, and Ochako reflects on whose in her corner.

## Chapter Notes

We are coming to a close friends! One more chapter + epilogue.

I can't thank you all enough for going on this journey with me, supporting me, and encouraging me through this journey of healing with me (and Ochako). You have made this such a life-giving and helpful process.

It turned out that the case was a high enough priority to involve several different agencies. Apparently, it was embarrassing that there was such a large-scale human trafficking syndicate in Japan that no one had yet to hear about.

And, right now, Ochako wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing as she sat in a room with Katsuki. She understood, she truly did, why he had been a bit more on edge the last few days. Why he was watching her a little more closely, noting her sleeping and eating habits with some of his earlier diligence. To his credit, he was trying to be subtle, but subtlety had never really been one of the tools in his arsenal.

She did understand. Katsuki had his own traumas, and Ochako noticed when something may or may not trigger that for him. But now he was in the room with her, along with Endeavor, Ryuko, Best Jeanist, Hitoshi, and several detectives, including Tsukauchi. And, right now, she could feel his eyes on her, and he wasn't side-eyeing her as Dynamight, but as Katsuki- her boyfriend. And now that was putting her on edge.

She just hoped no one else noticed.

Luckily, everyone's attention was locked on Kana Noto right now, the assassin sent to kill Maria.

Kana sat at the table, legs crossed and eyes darting around the room, cold and calculating and not too afraid despite the vulnerable position

she found herself in.

“Listen,” she told Ryuko. “Matsumoto is a ghost. I don’t even know who he or she is. I am 100% certain that isn’t a real name, and they never leave a paper trail. There are no loose ends, no physical records. Nothing. So...” she leaned forward and rested her chin in her hands, her eyes moving from Ryuko to Tsukauchi. “The way I see it, you guys need me as much as I need you.” She tapped her sharp canines with the long nail of her pinky finger. “Assuming you want to stop the enterprise and save all the girls and not just the one that Floaty here snatched out of the air.”

“Is that so?” said Ryuko. “Well, if you are looking to bargain with us, you better have one hell of a chip.”

“Wouldn’t be here if I didn’t,” she said, sinking back into the chair. “In return for protection and avoiding a life sentence for attempted murder, I can leverage what connections I do have to help you get a foot in the door to Matsumoto’s world.”

Detective Tsukauchi observed her for a moment before leaning forward onto the table. “I’ll talk to my superiors about what kind of deal can be offered to you, but are you saying that you would be able to get us inside?”

She scoffed. “Oh god, no,” she said. “I told you. They are careful. I wouldn’t be able to give you any names even if I wanted to. I get assignments to off any loose-ends that may be at risk of exposing them, and that’s it.”

Ochako tightened her fist in her lap. She spoke so casually and callous. She had been prepared to kill Maria, a victim, a sleeping girl. Ochako had to admit this woman was disarmingly charming and beautiful, but she knew that didn’t reveal the truth of someone.

She knew the world would be far less complicated if all villains had crusty-ass hands on their faces and wide, crazy eyes that indicated the villainy underneath. The “monsters” in the ring with her were the victims, and the shiny, beautiful people paying to see them kill each other; they had been the villains.

This woman was a villain.

“Say,” Kana said, letting her head fall lazily against the padding of her seat. “Can I get some water?”

They all sat for a beat, as if debating whether or not to entertain her request, but then Ryuko nodded at Ochako. She stood and made her way over to the water cooler, filling the paper cup. When she looked up at the table through her bangs, she saw Katsuki was looking at her.

Why was he looking at her?

What did he want from her?

What did he think she was going to do?

She walked the cup over to her and set it on the table in front of her hands, calm and collected.

“Thank you,” Kana said, throwing a catty wink at her. “No hard feelings, sweet thing?”

Ochako rolled her eyes. “For putting your ass on the ceiling?” asked Ochako, scooting the cup closer to her cuffed hands. “Yeah, no hard feelings.” Ochako turned to walk back to her seat beside Ryuko.

“You did catch me off guard,” admitted Kana. “I took one look at you and assumed you were there with your troupe to sell cookies.”

Ochako didn’t say anything; she knew better than to engage with that.

“Miss Noto,” pressed Tsukauchi. “If you don’t mind...”

“Oh, of course, handsome,” she said. “I got a little off-topic.”

Ochako rolled her eyes. This woman was flirting it up with about everyone in the room. Ochako wondered if that was her personality or a tactic to throw off the room's dynamic to maintain some sense of control and power.

“You were saying that you couldn’t get us in,” said Tsukauchi. “But I am assuming you have something to offer, or else we wouldn’t be here.”

“Ahh right,” she said, as though she just remembered where she left off in a story. “That is correct. I have no idea who runs the show or who is on top, or who is giving orders. But, I can set you up for a sale.”

Ochako felt a blanket of tension fall heavy over the room at her use of the word. “What do you mean by a sale?” asked Endeavor.



Kana rolled her eyes as if she were annoyed by being reminded that he was in the room. "What do you think I mean?" She said as though she were speaking to an idiot. "We're talking about human trafficking, dumbass. Keep it up."

Ochako could see the indignation flash across Endeavor's face, but, surprisingly, he remained calm.

"Anyway," said Kana. "I can get you connected to one of the suppliers, but that's the most connection I have."

Ryuko nodded and turned to Tsukauchi. "That's a possibility," she said. "I could go undercover or..."

A bark of a laugh interrupted Ryuko's suggestion, drawing all of their attention back to Kana. "Oh no," she said, shaking her head. "No... no...no...I wouldn't do that."

"And why is that?" asked Ryuko, annoyance only starting to bite into her voice.

"I mean, don't get me wrong," said Kana, holding up her palms. "I think you're hot, and I certainly wouldn't kick you out of bed."

"Get to the point," said Best Jeanist, thoroughly unimpressed with her display.

"You're too old," she said. "Waaay too old. It's *Matsumoto's girls* ... the clientele they draw has a particular taste."

Ochako kept her eyes focused on Kana and pointedly not on Katsuki. She had been avoiding his gaze since this interview started, and she was sure she would have to explain that later.

"Now this one..." said Kana, rolling her eyes toward Ochako and leaning forward excitedly against the table. "This pink-cheeked, cherub-faced cutie is exactly the type that Matsumoto is looking for you. How old are you, sweetheart? Sixteen?"

Ochako turned to look at Kana- calm and unphased by her words. People often thought she was younger than she was- especially now that her face was round and rosy once again. But she could all but feel the way Katsuki was tensing up on the other side of the table; she could see him in her mind's eyes trying desperately to keep his mouth shut.

“You think I could get in?” asked Ochako.

Kana raised an eyebrow. “I think they would make a bundle off of you.”

She heard the scrape of a chair that she didn’t need to look at to know was Katsuki, but when she did look over at him, he was being shoved back into his chair by Endeavor’s vice-like grip, while his other monster hand was being used to clamp shut over Katsuki’s mouth. Above the man’s hand, Katsuki’s eyes were blazing, jumping around the room as though he were trying to sort out who he wanted to explode, either Kana or Endeavor.

Maybe both?

But Ochako couldn’t be bothered with all of his big feelings right now. She was having a hard enough time keeping hers in check. And it was vital that she did. Right now, she wasn’t Ochako Uraraka.

Right now, she was Uravity.

And he was Dynamight.

“What would that achieve,” asked Ochako, raising her voice over Katsuki’s ruckus. “Getting me or anyone else inside? What would that do?” She looked at Detective Tsukauchi. “Would that...would that help?”

Tsukauchi looked from Ryuko and then back to Ochako as though he were weighing how or if he should answer. “Well,” he started cautiously. “In cases like this, it’s easy to take down low-level criminals if you rush the job. But usually, higher-ups never get caught, and the problem continues just somewhere else and with different victims. If we put in the time to set up an investigation and get eyes on the inside, we get a better idea of who is involved, to what extent they are involved, who to save, and the structure of an organization.”

Ochako considered this for a moment and wondered if this had impacted the investigation into her situation. Their escape had not been carefully orchestrated- it had been impromptu and desperate, with the media getting there as quickly as law enforcement, no doubt giving people time to run and hide and make excuses.

She wondered if they did this right, would they be able to put the villains away. Would it spare victims having to recount their worst nightmares and be torn apart by a lawyer? It could be swift and

thorough, and complete. For some reason, when she looked up, she made the mistake of looking at Katsuki.

He had a stormy expression in his eyes, like he wanted to yell something at her but was forcibly biting in his own tongue, and for a brief heart-breaking moment that look of frustration turned desperately pleading, almost begging, and she saw the slightest shake of his head.

No.

If they weren't here, Ochako would reach out to him, say something of comfort or assurance. Tell him that nothing was decided yet; they were just talking. But they were at work right now, and when Ochako looked up, Kana was already being escorted out so that the heroes and detectives present could no doubt discuss whether or not they wanted to secure a deal with this woman.

"Ochako," said Ryuko as soon as Kana was gone. "Just so you know, we aren't even considering putting you in a dangerous situation like that, so you don't have to worry about..."

"Wait," interrupted Endeavor, holding up a hand and looking at the Dragon Hero. "Why *aren't* we talking about it?"

Katsuki turned on his boss, furious and no doubt pumping deadly fuel into his palms. "What the fuck did you just say?"

Ochako could hear Shinso sigh in unison with Best Jeanist- both men intimately familiar with Katsuki's outbursts, and neither of them surprised.

"Remember," said Best Jeanist. "These are not pros, Endeavors. They are students."

Endeavor looked at Ochako. "You're 18, aren't you, Uravity?"

She nodded. "Yes, sir."

Endeavor looked around the room as if that eliminated any objections of that nature, which Ochako seriously doubted. "And," said Endeavor, looking at Ochako in a surprisingly apologetic expression for the man. "Not to be tactless, but it's not as if this isn't an area where Uravity has a certain amount of..."

"Finish that sentence, old man," growled Katsuki, snarling like a pit

bull at his boss. "Finish it, and I'll blow your fucking face off."

"He's not wrong," said Ochako with a shrug. He wasn't. It was a valid point as far as Ochako was concerned. "And besides," she continued. "If it's a viable option that will help us save these girls faster than..."

"Ochako..." Katsuki's voice was shaking with a barely-there tremor, but it was clear enough to her.

She clenched her fists tight to keep herself in her seat and from throwing herself across the table to smack Katsuki in the face. His worry was fine, but his tone was borderline at this point.

"I'm not a minor," she said. "I present as very young, which could be helpful, and I'll know how to defend myself on the inside and like Endeavor noted, this isn't entirely unfamiliar territory for me..."

"That's the fucking point!"

This time Endeavor did not intervene in keeping his hot-headed intern in his seat, and Ochako was sure that he wouldn't have been able to force Katsuki into silence even if he wanted to. Katsuki was now on his feet, his palms pressed to the table where there would be scorch marks, no doubt when he lifted his hands again.

"Not now, Dynamight," she said, desperately trying to keep her tone even when all she wanted to do was meet his energy with her own. She couldn't afford to, not right now and not in front of these people. Katsuki had a little bit more leeway having a long-established reputation as a loudmouth. If Ochako raised her voice, especially given the situation around them, she couldn't do anything other than assume that it would impact how people perceived her.

"Yes," he snarled, looking around the room as if it were going crazy, and he was the only sane one here, and he was desperately searching for a lifeline. She may have been inclined to feel something like sympathy for him a few moments ago, but that was rapidly evaporating. "Yes, we are fucking talking about this now because I can see that you've already made up your damn mind that this is what you want to do, and you shouldn't! This is not something that you are ready to..."

Ochako may have looked calm at that moment, but his words were like a flame on gasoline, igniting a rage inside of her that she knew was showing in her eyes to anyone who knew what to look for, and from the way she saw Shinso tense up a few seats away and Katsuki

balk ever so slightly, they didn't miss it either.

She had wanted to understand. She had been patient with his mother-hen ways over the past week because she understood him, and it was fine enough at the dorms when it was just the two of them. But right now, they were with people that she needed to take her seriously, and her boyfriend thinking he can have any say about her professional work was not what she needed them to associate with her.

It was all she could do not to cry or scream at him right there.

But instead, she inhaled sharply and turned her eyes to who was becoming her unlikely ally in this room.

“Endeavor,” she said, strangling to keep a hold of her tone. “If your intern can't discuss options for this without getting emotional and losing his head, then perhaps, he should leave the room and collect himself until he can rationally discuss all possible responses.”

Something passed through the older hero's gaze, something that looked almost like amusement, like he almost wanted Katsuki to hang around just to see how this dynamic worked itself out. But in the end, he just turned toward Katsuki.

“She's right,” he said, and Katsuki made a sound like he was choking on his own tongue. “Go and cool off, Dynamight.”

Katsuki made that same sound again, his whole face turning red with what was simmering inside of him and all the swear words he wanted to lob at the inhabitants of this room- and she was not exempt from that right now.

She raised her eyes to Katsuki, who was looking at her, as though waiting for an explanation while she remained firmly fixed on her own high ground. He had started this shit. He had called her credibility into question- so as mad as he was at being kicked out, it was nothing compared to what she felt.

But she also knew as he stomped out, like a raging, angry bull, that another conversation was coming.

Fine.

Bring it fucking on.

###

Katsuki had every intention of finding Ochako after the disastrous interview and briefing. He was not a pussy, and he was not scared of Ochako, dammit! He was not avoiding a fight with his girlfriend. Yes, he was quite sure a fight was coming, but he wasn't the kind of person who waited for a fight to come to him.

But- damn her- she was always trying to outdo him in the most infuriating and best ways, and this was no exception as she burst into his room, uninvited, waves of indignant rage coming off of her with overwhelming force.

Well, bring it on. He had plenty of his own.

They stared at one another for a good thirty seconds- stubbornly silent and seething and ready, armed to the teeth with their respective arguments, reasons, and fury, both equally convinced of their rightness.

"You owe me an apology," she finally said through gritted teeth. He dropped his bag on his bed and stepped toward her, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Are you fucking kidding me, Uraraka?"

"No," she spat back. "I'm not kidding you, *Bakugo*."

He flinched, but he should have seen it coming. Granted, he used her surname more often than she used his, so hers was inherently more barbed.

"You kicked me out of the fucking room," he barked.

She let out a frustrated growl and did a little hop that she often did when she reached max levels of anger- like her little body couldn't contain all of it, so she had to jump to shake some off. "You questioned my capabilities," she said, her voice low and shaky. "In a room with not only my boss..." she brought her finger up and wielded it like a sword in his face. "...but other pros and detectives. Possible future colleagues and superiors, and you essentially said that I was too emotional to be on this case!"

Katsuki scoffed without thinking, and as soon as he did think about it, he had regretted the dismissive sound of it. He knew this wasn't how they talked to each other; this wasn't how they fought. They always took each other's concerns seriously, so what the hell was going on now that they couldn't talk about this.

“Oh no,” he said, batting her finger out of his face and shaking his head stubbornly. “I didn’t say anything like that! I never said you were too emotional, Ochako. All I fucking did was...” he shrugged exaggeratedly, and he could see her eyes flash at the gesture. “I don’t know... *maybe* question the wisdom of you eagerly volunteering to relive the most traumatic events in your life without giving a thought to the consequences.”

She threw her hands up and grabbed at her hair exasperatedly. “We were just talking, Katsuki,” she said. “We were literally just talking, and then you lost your shit!”

He sneered. “Oh, don’t you fucking lie to me, Ochako,” he said. “Let’s fight if you wanna fight, but don’t fucking pretend that you haven’t already made up your mind.”

“I wouldn’t have brought it up if I didn’t think that I could do this; if I didn’t think that I was ready.”

“Yes, you would,” he countered quickly, pacing in front of her. “You would, Ochako! You would jump off a building without a second thought to save someone. So yes, you would agree to this.”

“Fine,” she spat back. “Even if that was true, it’s *my* decision, Katsuki! I’m not a child!”

“I fucking know that,” he said. “But you also need to stop thinking that you have to pay penance because you feel like you failed!”

Katsuki knew- he knew- he was getting into dangerous territory. He knew he was getting too close to an open wound, but that was kinda the point.

He needed her to know that.

The wound was still open, healing, but still open. And she needed to act accordingly. She couldn’t act like this was nothing. He would rather her hurt a little now than be wholly shattered in a few weeks.

Would he be there to help pick up the pieces?

Fuck yes.

But he didn’t want to see her undo all the hard work she had already done just to atone for something that she had no business thinking she needed to atone for. She had nothing left to prove.

“This isn’t about that, Katsuki,” she said. “It’s not about failure, or redemption or penance or anything like that. This is about Maria and the girls who are being hurt right now, and if I can...”

“Are you sure?” he snapped, his pacing coming to an abrupt stop. “Are you sure you aren’t so fucking eager to do this because you still feel guilty about the fact that you made it out and Li didn’t?”

There was a beat of silence, and the only word in Katsuki’s head at that point was...

Fuck.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

That wasn’t what he meant to say. He meant to remain vague. He hadn’t meant to mention Li by name. He knew of all the things that she was carrying inside of her still, that one still reared its head regularly.

The one she couldn’t save.

The one she had wanted to save as much as she had wanted to save herself.

Which was why he felt the way he did at all, but still...he knew he had stepped in it.

Her fists clenched at her side, tight and stilling, as if she was trying to keep herself from throwing a punch (though he wished she would). But he knew she wouldn’t. If they weren’t sparring or if they weren’t goofing off, they didn’t hurt each other.

Ever.

But still, a smack to his face would be better than the cold look of betrayal she was leveling him with now. Better than her turning away from him without a word, offering her back to him for maybe the second time in a year, and walking out of his room.

###

The first priority before they moved forward with any plan was to get Maria somewhere safe. Hopefully, they would get her reunited with her family soon, but Matsumoto needed to think she was dead right now.



They needed to think that Kana had successfully done her job.

Ochako knew there was a side to hero work and police work that she didn't understand yet- things that felt shady but that were also needed.

Like faking the death of a teen girl through an elaborate scheme of forged death certificates, a body in the morgue, and dental records. Ochako wasn't sure what or how they did it, but the next thing she knew, she was sitting with Maria at a safe location, waiting for the car to come and get her.

Her hair had been cut and dyed, and she was wearing contacts that made her dark eyes look bright blue, all in case someone sees her going from the building to the car. At least they were taking this seriously.

“Am I weak?”

Ochako turned from the window to look at Maria, taken aback by the suddenness of the question, but not the question itself. There was once a time when Ochako's instinct would have been to jump and tell her that she wasn't.

But she was different now.

And now she knew more about that question.

She knew what was behind a question like that. Ochako leaned against the windowsill and looked at Maria, intent, and open. “Why do you ask that?”

Maria looked down at her hands, picking at her thumb's nailbed in that way that Ochako recognized. She used to pick at hers until they were raw- one of the few habits that Katsuki helped her combat by simply slapping her hand gently.

Most things couldn't be solved that easy.

“I did this,” she said weakly. “This...I ended up here because I...I was stupid and weak and let myself be fooled. I should have known better.” She sniffed and looked up at Ochako, her now-blue eyes swimming with tears. She lifted her sleeve and wiped at her nose. “I'm smart,” she said with a wobbly smile. “I...I'm smart. I was a good student. And then some...some guy saw my Instagram and told me I could be a model, and I believed him.” She shook her head. “...I was

weak then, and I'm weak now."

"Maria," she said, moving closer and kneeling in front of her so she could look her in the eyes. She tentatively took the girl's hands in her, her grip purposely loose, but Maria's grip clamped down hard on her wrists. "You are allowed to feel however you feel, but I want you to know that weak and vulnerable aren't the same thing, and..." she shrugged. "Hell, we are all weak from time-to-time, all of us. Humans all have weak moments, but..." Ochako squeezed her hand and looked at her fierce and determined. Katsuki was an expert at this- he knew when to let her have her feelings and when he needed to remind her- without a doubt- what the reality was. And as angry as she was with him right now, that meant so much to her. "Weak or vulnerable; none of this is your fault. None of it. And I know it may take you a while to believe that."

Maria let out a small sigh. "I just...it wouldn't have happened to a stronger girl. I know that."

Ochako brushed her thumb over the back of Maria's hand. "That doesn't matter," she said. "Shitty people will find a way to hurt you, no matter what; no matter how weak or strong you are. I'm a hero, Maria. I've been trained to fight and defend myself, and I still ended up in a situation a lot like yours."

Maria's brow furrowed, her eyes shooting up to Ochako. "Really?"

Ochako nodded. "Yeah," she said. "I am strong. It's my job to save people, and bad people still hurt me really badly because it doesn't matter how strong or smart or competent you are, because shitty people will find a way to hurt you. But that's on them, Maria, okay? That's not on us. Plus, you're helping us save people," added Ochako. "You're a badass. You could have said no, but you're risking a lot by letting us help you, and that makes you brave."

Maria held her gaze for a moment, and while she didn't look convinced, something settled in her expression, something a little bit more like peace.

"You're going to save them, right?" she asked. "Like you saved me?"

Ochako nodded. "Yes, Maria," she said with a nod. "We're going to save them."

They weren't sure how yet, she had a meeting with Ryuko to talk more later that day, but for now, she could give Maria that. Maria had

done her job. Maria had been brave. Now, it was the heroes' turn to step up.

It was her turn to step up.

And she was going to do that.

###

“Uravity...” Ochako looked up into the intent, probing eyes of her respected mentor and superior. The woman’s voice was weighted with importance, wanting Ochako to listen to her closely. “I need you to hear me when I say that you don’t have to do this.

###

“I have to do this...”

*Dr. Shoko looked at her, calm and open and without judgment.*

*“And not for the reasons that Katsuki thinks,” she said. “Not because I feel guilty.”*

*“Is that what Katsuki thinks?” asked Dr. Shoko.*

*She wasn’t ready to talk about Katsuki, not yet. She wasn’t worried about losing him or breaking up; they had been through too much together and weathered too many storms for her to believe that this argument would be the end of it. And right now- there were more important things in front of her.*

*“He thinks it’s because of Li,” said Ochako.*

*“Is he right?”*

*Ochako considered it for a moment, carefully weighed the question in her heart and mind and soul.*

*“It is,” she answered, her voice barely above a whisper, her eyes cast down*

*on the familiar carpet. She had the patterns well committed to memory at this point.*

*It is about Li.*

*Of course, it is.*

*“It is about Li,” she said, looking up at Shoko, her mouth forming a hard line and her eyes narrowing with resolve. She clenched her hands into fists and pressed them hard into her knees. “It is about Li,” she said again, this time with more confidence and certainty. “It’s about Li, and it’s about the first person I was forced to kill, and it was about the boy who bled to death while I held his hand. And it’s about Maria. And it’s about me. It’s not about vengeance or atonement; it’s really not.”*

*For the first time, she believed that completely. She had spoken it to Katsuki, but even in her heart of hearts, she hadn’t been certain if that was true. Maybe it really was about revenge? About her own guilt? Maybe she just didn’t want to admit it.*

*Except, when she honestly looked at herself and asked that question, she found that she didn’t feel guilty anymore.*

*This was about something far bigger than her.*

*“It’s about all of them,” she said. “It’s about the fact that someone... someone should have saved them; someone should have been a hero for them, and I’m not talking about just at that moment. I’m talking long before it. Someone should have been in their corner, and no one was. That’s a hero’s job, and...” She swallowed the emotion tight in her throat. “I’m a hero. I want to be the one in their corner.”*

*A statement. Not a question, but a seizing of an identity that is and was true of her.*

*Heroes didn’t run away from a fight; they ran toward it, no matter how scary.*

*And Ochako was a hero.*

*###*

*“I want to do it,” she answered the Dragon hero. “I want to do this. If it helps us take these villains down, then I *want* to do it.” Ochako breathed in her nose and out her mouth. “I can do it. I wouldn’t say that if it wasn’t true.”*

Ryuko held her gaze for a moment- her eyes searching Ochako's face for something. Ochako wasn't sure what, but she could tell when Ryuko found it; Ochako could see the shift when Ryuko was no longer addressing her as a student or a teen but as Uravity.

"All right," she said, simple as that. "Then let's get started."

Ochako sat forward in her seat so she could look at the file that Ryuko pushed across the desk toward her. "Now that Maria is safe, and Kana is able to "prove" her death, we are working on getting into contact with her connection at Matsumoto's group to set up a drop-off. But things are moving fast, Ochako. It could be as soon as next week."

Ochako's heart clenched in her chest- next week.

She thought of Katsuki.

"I understand."

"We have made contact with another agency, and they are willing to lend out one of their sidekicks with a glamour quirk to alter your appearance."

She supposed that made sense. She wasn't a high-profile hero necessarily, but she had been on the news more time in the last year than her entire life- granted in a far more haggard state, but she understood the precaution.

"She can't change a person's entire appearance but can only work with what is already there," she said. "Which works well for our purposes since your youthful face is what is going to get you in the door, but we also need to be prepared for when you are in the door, okay, Uraraka? We are going to take every precaution to make sure we know where you are at all times."

Ochako nodded and flipped through the mission plan, listening to Ryuko give a brief rundown.

"We've spoken with your teachers..."

"We have an undercover detective who will be showing up to buy you at a scheduled auction. We don't know the date or location yet, but we will get it."

Ochako had no doubt.

This wasn't like last time.

She wasn't being snatched in the middle of a class trip.

She wasn't going to bed one night and then waking up the next morning only for her whole life to be changed.

This was different.

She was stronger and smarter than she had ever been before- more equipped and prepared than she ever would have believed herself capable.

This time she had no doubt of how powerful she was.

###

Katsuki was going out of his fucking mind.

By third year, it was no secret that Katsuki was a clingy son of a bitch, and going five days without talking to Ochako was hell, especially when he was so close to her during the day, between class and now their internships.

Several agencies were partnering in response to this Matsumoto thing, which meant he knew exactly what was going on, but, unfortunately, the only thing that rivaled Katsuki's clinginess was his stubbornness. And that was only reinforced with every new thing he heard about the mission- the mission he fucking begged Endeavor not to take him off of.

The mission he assured Endeavor he could be a part of without losing his cool.

So, he couldn't speak up- he couldn't voice his opinion when it came to Ochako's involvement, especially after his little outburst (that had really bitten him in the ass in more ways than one).

But every time he got close to reaching out to Ochako to apologize and explain, he learned something else about the mission that only reinforced his rightness.

*"Undercover because of her young features, but remember you need to act young too...really sell the little girl image."*

*"The agent will make sure to have the highest bid on you, Uravity...Kana was convinced that you will get a high price, so just keep your cool even if*

*someone tries to outbid on you...”*

*“Keep track of how many girls are with you; we don’t want to leave anyone behind.”*

Ochako, however, had plenty to say; all while Katsuki was biting his own tongue so hard he was sure he would draw blood. And, if it were anyone else, if Katsuki had some professional distance, he would acknowledge that what Ochako brought to the table was invaluable. She recalled with startling clarity all the things that Detective Tsukauchi had asked her after she escaped, giving her insight into what to notice and look for. She recalled details from the trial, what would have made it easier or clearer, and made a note to prioritize information and evidence that would help with that.

But this was different.

They were together right now; they were safe; he could see her, right in front of him, and his heart didn’t start pounding in his chest in the way it didn’t when he imagined her doing this; when he laid awake at night thinking about all the things that could go wrong.

*What if someone recognized her?*

*What if the tracker in her arm malfunctioned or was damaged, and they had no idea where she ended up?*

*What if she ends up locked away in a cell again?*

*What if they get the auction date wrong, and someone buys her and takes her halfway around the world?*

*What if she started having nightmares regularly again?*

*What if she stopped eating and sleeping?*

*What if...”*

“Hey man, are you okay?

Katsuki looked up from his book as Kirishima’s voice broke through his anxious spiraling. “No,” he answered sourly before he could even think about it.

Kirishima rolled his eyes. “Have you still not made up with Uraraka yet?”

Katsuki sneered and aggressively turned the page of his textbook. "She hasn't made up with me either," he growled.

"Yyeah," said Kirishima slowly, clearly not saying what he was thinking.

Katsuki slammed his book shut and glared across the table at Kirishima, looking around to make sure that they were alone in the common area. "You're not telling me you're on her side?!"

Kirishima shrugged sheepishly. "Weeeelllll..."

"What the hell, man?" declared Katsuki in an affronted voice. "You're supposed to be my best friend, and you don't even understand why I'm feeling like this?!" Damn! What was the point of learning to talk about his shit with the one or two people in the world he didn't hate if it just made people pissed at him?

"I am your best friend," said Kirishima. "That's how you know that I am only saying what I'm saying out of love!"

Katsuki slumped back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest petulantly.

"I'm just worried about her," he muttered. "Is that so fucking unbelievable that I would not want her to do something that has the potential to completely destroy all the work she has done? That I would have feelings about her retraumatizing herself?"

"No," said Kirishima slowly.

Katsuki narrowed his eyes. "What's the 'but,' Shitty Hair?"

"But," said Kirishima, folding his hands together like he was about to dispense his sage advice on Katsuki. God, having friends was so much work. "From all you told me, you didn't even take the time to explain to Ochako why you were worried."

"I didn't have time! She fucking decided right there in the room without even thinking about the possible consequences of this. Literally, anyone else could do this, so why is she jumping into it?"

"Did you *ask* her?" pressed Kirishima. "Or did you just *tell* her what you think her reasons are?"

Well...



Shit.

He couldn't argue that.

"Look, man," said Kirishima. "It's a hard spot we're in!"

"What the fuck do you mean 'we'?"

"Being madly in love with two badass heroes; balancing our desires to protect each other with our desire to also see each other succeed. It's hard. But dude..." Kirishima looked at him as though he were about to tell him the secrets of the universe. "I'm not saying you're totally wrong, but neither is she." Katsuki huffed angrily, but he didn't interrupt him. "Think about all that shit we went through first year with Shigaraki, and you ended up in a fight that was similar, and Ochako called you out in front of a bunch of pros and speculated about whether or not you were ready."

"I wasn't traumatized by that shit," snapped Katsuki.

"Dude, we were all traumatized by that...and don't act like that wouldn't have pissed you off. Put yourself in her shoes for just a second."

Katsuki sighed and let his head fall back against the chair as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I have been," he said. "I know why she's mad at me."

"Sure," said Kirishima. "I have no doubt that you know why she's mad at you. But that's not enough. You need to talk about this, or else you're going to keep repeating the pattern, and that is not a sustainable pattern for anyone, let alone for two heroes. You can say this is a one-time thing, but it's not. You're both going to do increasingly more dangerous jobs, and you will continue to worry about each other, so you will need to figure out how to do it in a healthy way."

Katsuki knew the idiot was right- he was always surprisingly insightful into his relationship with Ochako, even before they were dating, and he was just a punk-ass kid trying to figure out how to make her life just a little less awful.

But this was the constant hurdle in his relationship with Ochako. He loved her. He wanted her to be a hero- the best hero she can be, and he knew that meant that she was going to get hurt. It was when not if.

And he wasn't sure what to do with that or how to handle it.

But Shitty Hair was right- he had fallen in love with a hero, which meant this was their life. And as complicated as that could get, as scary as that could get, he wouldn't trade her for anything else.

"I need to talk to her," he said.

He knew that, of course- he had known it from the get-go. But now, knowing the timeline of this mission, the one Endeavor had so grudgingly shared with him, it meant he had to sack up and swallow his pride just a little quicker than he usually would want too.

But like hell he was going to waste the time he had left with her before she had to go.

Leave him.

Again.

Except, this time, she would be safer, and- this time- he was in love with her.

###

Hitoshi had immense respect for Ochako Uraraka.

She was kind; she was smart; she was clever; she was probably the first student in the A-class who he would have said he had any real genuine affection for- being mainly apathetic to the lot of them at first with an antipathy for a few.

Since joining the class, he had found something to enjoy about all of them. And he really, really like a lot of stuff about a few of them; and even as the life was being choked out of him by a pair of very solid thighs, he made a mental note to check in and see if he was meeting Kami in his room tonight or Hitoshi's.

But his clouding vision brought him back to the present and his current situation- flat on his back and suffocating.

He liked Ochako quite a bite.

And his respect had only grown over the last year- not only was she a good person and a good hero, but she was a formidable training partner, currently cemented by the fact that her thighs were wrapped around his neck, squeezing the life out of him.

It wasn't the worst place to be (though he would keep that to himself because of a certain explosive boyfriend), except that he had tapped her leg twice now, and the lack of oxygen was starting to go to his head.

He gave her calf a firm squeeze, reminding her that he was there.

"Uraraka," he wheezed out.

"Oh, shit..." her hold loosened, letting him roll away from her.  
"Hitoshi, I'm sorry!"

He waved at her dismissively and grabbed his water bottle, and took a drink as he caught his breath again. "Distracted?"

She snorted and sat up, bending her knee and pressing her elbow into it, using it to stretch her back. "You could say that."

"Sooo," he said, slowly not sure if he was overstepping in bringing it up. He had been the only other peer in the room that day. Sure, everyone else in their class noticed the coldness between the couple, but Hitoshi had seen the cause of it all, which he kept to himself, of course, for multiple reasons. "I'm assuming that you two haven't had a post-blow-up heart-to-heart and apology?"

She snorted. "You think I owe him an apology?"

Hitoshi considered her question for a moment because he prided himself on his honesty. "No, not necessarily," he said. "I think you were right about Bakugo not being in a place where he could discuss the options rationally."

Ochako dropped her knees so that her legs were straight out in front of her. "But," she pressed.

"Well, I don't have a but for that part," he said. "You weren't wrong..." She sighed and cocked her head to the side, annoyed and pressing. "But..." he said tentatively. "It is complicated, isn't it?" She pointed her feet and leaned forward to touch the tips of her toes.

"How?" she asked.

He suspected she knew but also that she was still interested in what he had to say. “Well,” he said. “Here’s the thing, I like you, Uraraka, I really do...”

She snorted. “Thanks...”

“And if you say you can do this, I believe you, but I kinda get to say that from a safe distance.”

“A safe distance?”

He shrugged and stretched his arm across his chest, tugging lightly until he felt the pull on his upper arm. “If you do this and it blows up in your face, as upsetting as that will be, my day-to-day will remain largely unchanged.”

He didn’t mean that as an insult, which he was certain she knew. He wanted to see his peers succeed, and he didn’t want to see bad things happen to any of them. And as far as it was in his power, he would protect them when he could.

“My life won’t be changed forever if something bad happens to you,” said Hitoshi. “But Bakugo’s will. I may not be the guy’s number one fan, but if this blows up and leaves you in a million pieces, then Bakugo is gonna have a front-row seat to it.”

“So what,” she asked. “I’m supposed to make all my decisions based on whether or not they will impact my boyfriend?”

He shook his head hurriedly. “Fuck no,” he said. “Not saying that at all. But has Katsuki ever really talked down to you?”

“No,” she admitted, a little grudgingly.

“Ever thought you were weak?”

“No,” she said with a heavy sigh. “He never expects anything of me other than my best. It’s...it’s how we kinda started being friends in the first place. He never thought I wouldn’t make it out.”

Hitoshi cocked his head to the side. “All right,” he said. “So, do you think maybe he’s earned the benefit of a doubt?”

“Of course, he has,” she said, clearly frustrated. “But I’m still angry!”

“And you should be,” said Hitoshi. “You have every right to be angry at him; he did a shitty thing in a shitty way. But you just have to

recognize that this is a complication when it comes to dating another hero.”

“You’re dating one,” she accused petulantly.

Hitoshi smirked. “I’m not madly and stupidly in love with Denki, but, yes, even that makes it complicated. Of course, I’m gonna watch his back in the field, and I can’t say for sure that it won’t compromise my ability in the field, for good or bad. But you two look at each other like you’re the whole damn world, so...I can’t imagine that doesn’t make things harder.”

She rubbed her face wearily before dropping her hands with a clap to her knees. “So what do we do?” she groaned.

Hitoshi shrugged. “Well, do what we are at UA to do,” he answered. “Practice being a hero. This is gonna be a part of your relationship with that loudmouth for a long time, so you guys just have to practice talking it out.”

Ochako chewed on her lip, mulling over his words. “Practice, huh?”

“Makes perfect, they say.”

She smirked at him. “When did you get so insightful, Hitoshi.”

“I’m insightful as hell,” he said, standing up and holding his hand out to her. “Always have been.”

Ochako grinned up at him and accepted his hand. And Hitoshi did not consider himself a sentimental person, but he was suddenly struck by the memory of their first time speaking after she came back to UA. Right after she kicked Mineta's ass. She had been on the ground like this, looking up at him like this. “So true,” she muttered, shaking her head and pulling herself up. “So true.”

Except this time, she was smiling.

And this time, she was his friend.

###

Ochako didn’t finish patrol until 11 pm that night, and she assumed that Katsuki was asleep. By the time she got home, showered, and ready for bed, it was midnight, and Katsuki would definitely be in

bed. She could have texted him, she supposed, but she didn't decide where she wanted to be tonight until she was at his door.

But today, they set a date with Kana, a day for Ochako to be "sold" to Matsumoto's people, and it was five days away.

Five days until she had to put all her talk into action.

She could do this but hearing that it was set in stone sent the first reaching tendrils of fear around her heart. She was afraid. She still knew she could do this, but she was also afraid. And when she was afraid, she wanted to be with Katsuki.

There was once a time when the admittance would have made her feel weak.

But if there was anything the last year and a half had taught her, it was how much she needed her people.

And she wanted to feel safe right now.

And she knew, no matter what they did or what they said or how angry they were, he wouldn't make her leave when she truly wanted to be with him. She opened his unlocked door and stepped inside quietly into the dark bedroom. She felt an immediate wave of comfort—the feel of it, the smell of it, the look of it all warming her from the inside out.

It was like being enveloped in Katsuki.

She closed the door softly before she scampered the few feet to his bed and pulled back the blankets. He groaned in sleep-laden protest, but when Ochako tucked herself in tight to his side, draped her leg over his, laid her head on his chest, and draped her arm over his torso to pull herself closer, she felt his arm instinctively curl around her, pulling her even closer, even before he had fully woken up.

She wondered, for a moment, if he was awake. It didn't matter to her right now. Right now, she just wanted to be close to him again...she had gone too long.

It wasn't until she felt the slow movement of his hand up and down her back that she realized that he was awake, and then the sound of his gravelly voice, thick with exhaustion, whispered into her hair.

"I'm sorry, Ochako."

She swallowed hard, an overwhelming wave of emotion crashing over her at his words. Just hearing his voice after almost a week without talking to each other made her feel just a little bit more at ease, despite the anxiety of the day.

“Me too,” she said. Not for being a hero, not for doing the right thing, but for this...for waiting until now to talk to him about it.

“It’s not that I don’t think you can do this,” he said.

“I know.” With the other hand that was dangling off the other side of his torso, she groped around in the dark until she found his hand so she could lace their fingers together, relishing in the feel of it.

“I just...I don’t think you should have to...” she blinked her eyes shut to keep the tears in place, not because she was embarrassed by them (she cried plenty in front of Katsuki), but because she could hear the feeling in his own whispered voice and she knew if her emotions bubbled to the top, he would try and shut his down. She didn’t want that. “I hate that you have to,” he added, running his thumb back and forth across her finger pads. “It pisses me off. I know you can do anything, but I really don’t want this to set you back. You’ve worked you’re ass off, and I don’t want this to ruin it.”

She didn’t object. She didn’t try to assuage him or tell him that wouldn’t happen because she genuinely didn’t know. She had no idea what it would be like when she got there. She knew it wouldn’t destroy her, but that didn’t mean it wouldn’t hurt.

And she knew if she hurt- so did Katsuki.

Because the reverse was true too.

“Your dad once...he...” his voice faltered just a little, like he was second-guessing whether or not he should continue. She squeezed his hand, letting him know that he could continue. “He told me that he worries about you because you love without thinking...”

“Without a safety net,” she whispered into his chest. “That’s what my daddy says.”

He had said it before to her.

*“You love without a safety net, Sweet Pea,” he had said to her when she came home after confessing to Deku and found that he would never feel for her the way she had for him. “So, make sure you got someone who can*

*catch you.”*

“Right,” said Katsuki. “I never...I never thought I would fall in love with someone like that. It was bad enough with Deku...you called it when I barely knew you. I kept him at a distance because I don’t know how to stay sane and care about people who love like that. And now...” she could hear the strain in his voice as it dropped an octave, feebly trying to mask just how much he was feeling in this moment. She held him tired, overwhelmed with the desire to hold him close and run her fingers through his hair and tell him that everything would be okay.

She wanted to do that for him so bad.

But she didn’t. Because they don’t lie to each other.

She knows that everything *will*, eventually, be okay. But she doesn’t know that this- this thing in front of them- will be OK.

“And now I love you so fucking much that I don’t know what to do with it. And it freaks me the fuck out to see you do this.”

She breathed out slowly, dragging her fingers comfortingly across the palm of his hand. “I know,” she said. “I know it does.”

He was scared.

And fear was probably the emotion that he least knew what to do with.

“I’m scared too,” she admitted in the darkened safety of Katsuki’s room. “I’m scared. But I’m most scared for those girls. I’m scared for all those girls like Maria who probably think that no one is looking for them.”

He didn’t say anything to that, not right away. But he dropped a kiss to the top of her head, a kiss where she couldn’t tell when it ended because he held that position for a few more minutes, his face buried in the top of her head.

“Even though I’m afraid for you,” he said. “Doesn’t mean I’m not proud of you, you know that, right?”

She moved for the first time, adjusting so that she could tip her head back to look up at him in the dark, and even like this, awoken in the middle of the night for a heart-to-heart with his girlfriend, he was still



breathhtaking, his eyes smoldering with an intensity and a knowing that made everything else fall away.

“I’m always in your corner, Ochako,” he said, his voice heavy with certainty. “Always.”

She reached up and brushed her fingers over his cheekbone before cupping his face in her hand.

“I know you are, Katsuki.”

She knew that with her whole heart.

It’s one of the many reasons she knew she could do it this time.

She had finally come to realize that she couldn’t have saved everyone last time. *Those* people- those villains- had made sure of it. She was stronger now. She was older now. She was more confident now.

She wasn’t sitting in a cage waiting for someone to come and save her.

She was doing the saving this time.

And this time, she thought as she tipped her head up for a slow, sweet, tired kiss, she had Katsuki in her corner.

That was a damn big safety net.

# A Warrior

## Chapter Notes

Okay friends! This is it! The last chapter + epilogue (I have a note about the epilogue at the end)

Anyway, I cannot say enough how deeply grateful I am to each of you for going on this journey with me. I know this year has been hard in so many different ways, but there were so many times I was worried processing my wounds and trauma would get the better of me, but having a community like you (along with friends and therapy) to help me work through it a creative, new, and even fun way, has meant the world to me.

Thank you for the love, support, and encouragement. Thank you for the comments- where so many of you just left the most thoughtful and beautiful analysis and compliments that spurred me on to think differently about this story. Thank you for those of you have shared a little bit of your own story, it has meant the world to me be even a small player in helping you process your own trauma in a new and healthy way.

Remember you are all loved, you are all worthy, you are all warriors. <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ochako stood- quiet and shaking and sniffing in the dark of the night- as the man circled her like a vulture, looking her over with the eyes of a businessman weighing a deal.

“How old?” he asked, looking at her “seller.” Detective Takada was playing the part well, but she supposed that went with being an undercover cop. He knew the dirty underbelly of criminal life, and he looked and acted every bit the part.

“Sixteen,” he answered.

Matsumoto’s representative paused in front of her and looked her dead in the eyes. Ochako let out a small, fearful whimper and looked down at her shoes, averting her gaze (after having assessed and cataloged every physical feature about the man that she could).

*“Remember,” Katsuki had told her the night before, Ochako nestled*

*between his legs and caged in by his knees as she draped herself over his torso, her arms tight around him. "While you're there, you are a terrified, sixteen-year-old victim of human trafficking."*

*She nodded. She knew that of course, but she liked listening to his voice, and it made him feel better to go through it all again.*

*And it made her feel better to be with him.*

*"So, if some extra who you could take with one hand behind your back threatens you or tries to intimidate you, you have to let them, yeah?"*

She shivered in the night air and let out a small cry as the man grabbed her by the chin and lifted her face. His touch, though, was surprisingly light- like he didn't want to hurt her.

Ochako remembered what Maria had told her. Matsumoto's Girls were treated "well" because they were considered high-class merchandise. People didn't pay their prices to get roughed up goods.

"Open," he commanded, giving her face a slight squeeze. She obeyed.

"She's got all her damn teeth," said Takada. "You think I'd be asking what I am for her if she didn't have all her pearly whites?"

"Just being thorough," he said. "No need to get huffy." The man looked down at Ochako, guiding her chin left and then right as he took in her whole face. "These cheeks alone are worth a million yen." He grinned down at her and then at Takada. "Alright," he said. "We have a deal."

He reached into his pocket and took out a business card, and handed it to Takada.

"You will find the funds here in this temporary account." Takada looked over the card scrutinizingly and then back up at the buyer. "You have five hours to access the account and move the funds before it disappears- along with your payment."

Takada sneered and pocketed the card. "Like hell, I'm not going to get paid," he growled. "All the fucking work I did to get this little princess to you, I damn well better get paid."

"Well then," Takada said. "We'll be off." He pressed a hand into the small of Ochako's back and guided her toward the sleek black car that was waiting for them. He even opened the door and helped her slide

into the backseat.

It was all so...odd and disturbing in a way that she couldn't quite place.

He stretched out in the seat across from her, and he reached over to the seat beside him. She could hear the clink of ice as he pulled out a bottle of champagne and two glasses.

She eyed them wearily- which she supposed wasn't out of character for the role she was playing.

She was scared and distrusting in this role.

She wasn't an undercover hero who could kick his ass if she wanted to. Though she didn't wonder briefly what his quirk might be. He poured a glass and then handed it to her without asking if she wanted one. She took it in her shaking hand, but she didn't take a sip, rather regarded it with fearful uncertainty. Then he proceeded to pour himself one.

He took a sip and let out a contented sigh. His eyes jumped to her and to her glass. "Have a drink," he said. "It's delicious. Probably more expensive than you've ever had the chance to taste."

She bit back a laugh at just how true that was.

"I...I've never had alcohol before," she said, trying to keep an innocent tremble in her voice.

"Well," he said. "No time like the present." He jutted his chin once again at her glass. "Drink."

She obeyed and took a small sip. It was bubbly and fresh, but she was a little bit of a philistine and couldn't tell the difference between this and the cheap stuff her parents let her drink at New Years'.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. She shook her head and kept her eyes cast down. The car hadn't had any plates from what she could see, and there were no discerning features in the back seat to catalog away. "Hey."

Her eyes jumped up to him, and he smiled at her. "Don't be afraid, little one." Her insides clenched at the nickname. "You're beautiful and sweet and just the kinda girl our top-dollar clientele are looking for. We bring in a lot of pretty girls, but none so fresh looking as

you.”

She sniffed. “I want to go home,” she whimpered.

“I know, sweetheart,” he said, reaching across the way and patting her knee. She braced herself for the hand to move or wander further, but he almost immediately retracted it. “But I promise if you’re nice to us, we will be nice to you, and if you’re nice to your buyer, you may get the life of a princess.” He cocked her head to the side and smirked. “Doesn’t that sound nice, princess? You can go on yachts and private planes and eat good food.”

She wondered if the same thing had been said to Maria- before she was sold to a man that made her want to throw herself off a balcony.

She sniffled. “If I’m nice?”

He nodded. “Yes, sweetheart...if you’re nice.”

She nodded and wiped at the tears falling down her cheeks.

*“Shit, Ochako, you’re getting too damn good at that!”*

*Ochako giggled as she wiped away the salty liquid she had worked herself up to while sitting on the bed across from Katsuki. “Right! I’m so good at it now!”*

*He narrowed his eyes. “You’re gonna use this new talent for good or evil?!”*

*She grinned impishly at him and pressed her palms into her knees as she rocked toward him, kissing him quickly on the lips before she rocked back down. “For good,” she said. “And maybe small shenanigans.” She tapped her chin thoughtfully. “What kind of fancy imported desserts do you think I could get out of Shoto if I cried?”*

*Katsuki narrowed his eyes. “Oh, don’t act like that little shit wouldn’t spend his daddy’s money on you any time you asked- no tears needed.”*

*“Can I use them on you?” she asked.*

*“Tch...I’m an impenetrable fortress of coldness,” he said. “Those tears ain’t gettin’ anything gout of me!”*

*“Liiies,” she said, leaning forward again for one more kiss, one that she would get with or without her fake tears.*

*“Okay,” she said, exhaling slowly and taking another shaky sip of her*

champagne. "Okay...I...I can be nice." She looked up at him, her bottom lip trembling. "No one will hurt me if I'm good, right?" The words felt sickly and thick on her tongue, but she could see the way the man responded to them, like he was looking at a stack of yen.

"That's right, sweetheart," he said. "Don't you worry. We'll take good care of you."

###

The first day she was gone, Katsuki didn't expect that he would sleep. He had been prepared for it, ready to toss and turn and attempt to breathe his way through the pit of anxiety twisting and turning inside of his stomach. Making him feel like he was going to be sick at any moment.

God, was this what Ochako went through the first six months of being home- this constant state of hyperawareness and wrecked nerves?

He could barely stand it for one day, and he had expected that after the first night that it would start to dull.

But then it didn't.

His appetite was gone the next day- a bad combination with the bone-deep exhaustion he felt. Of course, he still dominated in his classes, his training, and his internships. But he felt like he was fighting twice as hard to reach his usual level of amazingness.

And that only made him more tired.

And then the second day proved to be just as bad. If not worse, because it meant it was *her* second day. It meant that she was feeling whatever she was feeling for two days now, and he hated not knowing *how* she was feeling.

She had asked him once what it had been like for him when she was gone, and he didn't know how to answer that question at the time. It was hard to separate how he felt now with how he felt then. It wasn't that long ago, but he could barely conceive of a time when he didn't belong to her in the way he did now. But even then, he had been disturbed by her absence; noticed it; been bugged by it.

But now, it was all-consuming.

And before he fell asleep (when he did fall asleep) and when he woke

up, the first thing he wondered was if she was safe; if she was hurting; if she was hungry...and it was hard to focus on anything else the rest of the day.

He knew that he would have to figure out a way to do this. He knew that their future as heroes meant he had to, and he would.

But he couldn't seem to figure it out on this round.

He couldn't get his body to settle down.

By the end of the third day, he was left wondering how Ochako survived months of this when he could barely take three days. Endeavor sent him home early from his internship. He had even done it nicely- which pissed Katsuki off to no end.

When Endeavor reminded him that he was a student and not a pro yet- it was all he could do not to punch the old guy in the face. Because he had to go back to the dorms, which meant being alone with this fucking feeling that was only growing with every passing second.

*Was she okay?*

*Was she hurt?*

*Was she afraid?*

*Was she cold?*

*Was she alone?*

*Was she sleeping?*

He couldn't concentrate during class; on his homework; on his dinner; on cleaning his room; on any conversation anyone tried to have with him. The only time he was able to remotely distract himself was when he was beating the shit out of something or someone (but unfortunately, Kirishima had other obligations than being his own personal punching bag right now).

So, he rolled out of bed at 10 pm to go on a run, to move his body, to stretch his limbs, to feel his blood pumping and his muscles straining and his body sweating.

*God, he missed her.*

He had not been prepared for how much this was going to hurt. He ran harder, at a break-neck sprint, for as long as he could, until he felt like his lungs were going to explode, trying to feel anything in his body besides distress.

He had felt inklings of this more than once throughout his relationship with Ochako- friendship and otherwise- this deep dread that it would be too hard to belong to someone, to depend on someone, to want someone. Not worrying about his own skin, his own body, his own safety, his own life, was one thing, but watching her be just as reckless as he was...

It was hell.

At least right now.

He had felt that more than once- but never as strong as he was feeling it now.

He had to figure this out.

He had to figure out how to love her as much as he did and do the very thing he loved her for, while not being destroyed by it. He sprinted as hard as he could, for as long as he could, for as far as he could. Until he was drenched in sweat.

Until he was back at the dorms.

Heaving and exhausted and no less unmoored.

As he approached the dorms, he saw Aizawa sitting on the stairs, waiting for him with narrowed, appraising eyes, but he didn't look surprised.

“What the hell are you doing out of bed, Bakugo?”

He snorted and rolled his eyes, shoving his hands into the pockets of his sweats as he met his teacher's eyes, completely unphased.

He was eighteen, for goodness sake, a few months away from being nineteen, he wasn't about to be raked over the coals for being out of bed past 9 pm.

Especially not right now.

“I went on a run,” he grumbled.



Aizawa pinched the bridge of his nose. "You know the alert doesn't tell me your reasons," he said. "All it tells me is that you left."

"Well," he said with a shrug. "Sounds like a you problem, old man." Katsuki scoffed and stepped onto the first step. Katsuki, generally, treated his teachers with respect, but he was tired, and he was angry, and his insides were twisting with an anxiety that he couldn't seem to dull no matter how much he wanted to. He moved to pass his teacher- assuming he wasn't going to be reprimanded and could go ahead and continue his torture in his room.

"She's coming back, Bakugo..."

His teacher's voice made him pause in front of the door, made his whole body go rigid, and his shoulders bunch in frustration.

Bakugo spun around and snarled at Aizawa. "Don't fucking patronize me," he snapped. "You don't think I fucking know that?" He took a step closer to Aizawa and pointed at himself. "I've never given up on her once; I ain't starting now."

"No," said Aizawa, leaning lazily up against the pillar. "No, you haven't."

Katsuki snorted. "I know she's coming back," he snapped again, his voice shaking and simmering.

"I fucking know it." He did know it. He knew she would come back, but he didn't know how she was going to come back.

He knew he would love her no matter what- knew he would love her whatever version of herself comes back after this mission. But, God, he wanted her to be okay- better than okay.

"What I don't fucking know is if some asshole is gonna hurt her!" Aizawa's eyes narrowed appraisingly, and Katsuki found that terribly irritating. "What I don't fucking know is if she's cold, or hurt, or hungry!" Aizawa looked at him with that same calm, infuriating gaze.

Like he just knew all of this already.

Like he wanted Katsuki to scream at him like this.

Like he had been waiting for it for the last couple of days.

And that made him want to scream even more. "What I don't fucking

know is if some fucking villain is gonna put his hands on her, and she just has to sit there and take it because she can't compromise her cover! So, unless you can tell me for sure that she's safe, that she's not afraid right now, and that none of that is gonna happen, how about you keep your goddamn mouth shut!?"

Katsuki wasn't sure when his voice had raised to a scream.

But Aizawa was used to it by now.

He let out a frustrated yell as he tugged violently on his locks. "Fuck!" Aizawa waited for him to finish- waited for the rest of the thought. "Fuck! What the fuck am I supposed to do with this?!"

"With what?"

Katsuki's eyes narrowed at him appraisingly. "Is this why you never got married?"

If the question was an overstep, Aizawa didn't indicate it. "Is what?"

Katsuki gestured vaguely. " *This* ! I'm going out of my fucking mind. I can't eat; I can't sleep; I can't think, and I don't know how to stop."

Aizawa looked at the angry blonde for a few moments before he spoke. "I love a great many people, Bakugo."

Katsuki let out a sharp breath and rubbed his face. "I didn't mean that you..."

"Let me finish," said Aizawa sternly. "I have never been in love, but I love Eri. I love my friends. I love my students. So... why I may not know exactly what you are feeling, I can tell you that it gets easier."

He couldn't imagine.

"I can tell you that eventually, all of those feelings and all of those people stop being the thing that scares you and become the thing that motivates you. To be better. To be faster. To go harder." Aizawa pushed off the pillar and walked over to Katsuki. "I've been able to see first-hand the way the two of you make each other better heroes. So, don't let that stop here."

Katsuki couldn't help but wonder if Midnight's death was among the things that motivated his teacher. He loved his friends, and Katsuki wondered if he had loved her too. Did that failure haunt him? Did it

motivate him? Did it frighten him?

Was he scared that it could happen again?

Was he worried that one day the loss would be one of his students?

“This is a part of what it means to be a hero,” continued Aizawa.

“Love doesn’t make heroes weaker, Bakugo. Ever. It just means you have more to lose.”

Bakugo didn’t lose well.

He hated losing.

Which, once again, is what made loving people so complicated.

If it was all in his control, he could control the loss or win; when other people got involved, it got much harder to manage.

“I don’t know for certain that Ochako will be okay,” Aizawa continued, raising a hand and placing it on Katsuki’s shoulder. “But... for what it’s worth...I really, truly believe that she will be okay. She’s ready for this. I believe that.”

Katsuki did too.

Aizawa squeezed Katsuki’s shoulder before he let go and turned to walk down the stairs. “Get to bed, Bakugo, or I’ll have you assisting with the first years at 6 am tomorrow.”

Katsuki rolled his eyes and turned back toward the dorms. “Think it’s healthy to let me work out all this pent-up rage on a bunch of infants?”

“Could be humbling for you to get your ass handed to you by a first-year, Dynamight.”

Katsuki didn’t even dignify that comment with an answer. He was too tired for this shit. He needed to get his ass in bed. He needed to focus, to keep training, and keep pushing.

He couldn’t slow down if he wanted to keep pace with his badass girlfriend.

###

So far, based on everything that Maria had told her, Ochako wasn’t

really surprised. She had yet to be smacked, kicked, punched, or starved. The only physical harm done to Ochako was the brand that was burned into her skin on her arm.

Marking her as one of Matsumoto's girls- a brand of authentication.

They had examined Maria's closely and were able to remove it safely, so Ochako tried not to concern herself with that. Because, well, like hell, she wanted this to be her first tattoo.

But other than that, so far, she was physically fine. They weren't overly concerned with modesty or comfort as they stripped everyone down in community showers. Armed guards watched them, making it clear they couldn't leave. But the water was warm, and the soap and shampoo smelled good.

People didn't pay 50 million yen for emaciated, unwashed product.

They even drew blood to run an STD panel on all of the girls.

From what Ochako gathered, it wasn't that they didn't sell girls who tested positive for an STD, but that it lowered their price by quite a bit.

Ochako had no idea where she was- the blackened windows of the car on her first night had kept her from noting any landmarks, and the mask she was forced to wear while moving from the car to the compound she now found herself. All she knew is that she had been in the car for at least three hours.

She wasn't sure if they had actually driven for two hours or if that was yet another tactic to confuse the trafficked girls. She could be a few streets down from UA for all she knew.

Probably not.

She reminded herself once again of the tiny, microscopic tracker in her arm- a beacon, keeping her rooted and safe.

The first night, she found herself in a room with 15 other girls, all just as new as she was. Ochako wondered if they ever had any that lasted more than one auction, or were they so discerning with their choices that every single girl was bought every single auction.

Was the demand for one of Matsumoto's girls so great that they had to constantly resupply?

Ochako kept count of the girls. 15 on the first night. Two more joined them the second night. And 4 on the third night.

20 girls right now.

Some of them were chatty- even seemed to be excited to be here.

“You shoulda seen the shit-hole my parents were living in,” one girl said. “This is a lot better! And if I have to suck some rich guy’s dick to get three squares a day, I’ll do it.”

She couldn’t have been any more than 15. And Ochako’s heart ached for, wondering if it was an act to hide the fact that she was terrified, or if her life had really been such that this was preferable; either way, it made her easy prey for villainous adults.

Others were in shock- and she was reminded of Maria.

“They told me it was a modeling job,” said one girl in broken English. “I...I thought that’s what it was.”

Ochako wanted to comfort her, to assure her that it would be okay, but she didn’t want to draw attention to herself. Not yet. Not yet; she needed to keep her head down and pay attention. Right now, she needed to play the part too.

She was scared.

She was alone.

She had no idea how she got here.

All things she felt in that cage.

All things that had imprinted on her soul in ways that couldn’t be undone- making the desire to assure these girls that they would be okay all the more powerful.

But they weren’t in cages. They weren’t being physically harmed- well, inasmuch as denying bodily autonomy in any fashion “didn’t harm” them. But still...

It was different.

But also, the exact same thing.

And that made her feel a sickness in the pit of her stomach.

Now, she supposed, if she had to pick, with a gun to her head, which place she would rather be in, she would pick this over the cage in a hole in the ground. And for some reason, that filled her with an even greater animosity for Matsumoto and his entire enterprise.

There was something about it that felt so...

Gross.

So dishonest.

So deceitful.

And while, at the moment, sleeping on a relatively comfortable bed, with a filled stomach, and with armed guards on the outside, wasn't the most horrible position she had ever been in, she resented the lie of it all.

She wondered how many girls had been lured in with this.

Taken advantage of.

Left to make them feel like they were complicit with their own slavery because they had been lured in with promises of glitz and glamour.

No less destructive and horrifying, but somehow it felt slimier.

On the third night, in a room with twenty other sleeping girls, Ochako wondered how many had gone before them. How many might still be coming?

In the night, in the dark, Ochako could hear the sobbing of the new girls who arrived today. They spoke in a language that Ochako could not understand, but somehow, she was sure that they were calling out for home.

For mothers and fathers and grandparents and friends.

Crying out for someone to keep them safe.

She breathed out slowly, and her thumb brushed over her fingers-almost instinctively- as if the little *baku* pendant was there and not tucked away safely at her dorm. But her fingers remembered it-remembered the texture, the lines, the smoothness. She closed her eyes and pictured it, and her body was not overcome with a desire to run, with panic, with sirens going off in her brain telling her to run because she was in danger.

She felt safe.

And because of that- she would keep them safe too.

###

By day five, Ochako had come into contact with 26 girls, 10 different guards, 3 doctors, and 5 “handlers,” like the guy who had driven with her to this place. The handlers were always well dressed. She wondered if they were independent or if they were employees of Matsumoto. Employees made the most sense to her, given how tight-lipped it all was. She doubted very much that they wanted people running all over the place with no oversight.

When Ochako went to sleep, she went through her mental Rolodex of faces and roles and function. She wanted no doubt when she gave her report; she wanted to make sure no one who was apart of this got away; she wanted to give a thorough rundown of every person involved.

And the girls- she reviewed every last one of them too- she didn't want a single thread to be loose, a single one of them to be left hanging. She wouldn't let them become like Tomihiko- unanchored and alone, left to fend for themselves in a world that didn't know how to care for them.

She would make sure every last one of those girls got home.

And the ones that didn't have homes- well, she would harass every last one of the heroes until they figured out a way to help them too.

Day six, it seems, is the day that something changes. No girls come that day. Their total remains at 26. They are directed to scrub themselves clean- they are doused with scented perfumes, and for the first time, someone comes in to do their makeup.

This...this felt familiar to Ochako.

All of the girls are given an image- which they were to sell on the stage.

The schoolgirl.

The stepdaughter.

The princess.

The bad girl.

The nerdy girl.

The pure, virginal girl.

The little sister.

The maid.

The androgynous girl.

The sweet-as-candy girl.

And on and on and on it went...

Every fantasy, projected onto these girls.

These kids.

Not even out of high school yet.

Everything a girl could be in the imaginations of those who saw them as less than human- every possible archetype that they don't know only exists in fantasy, so they project them onto girls who can't run away.

Those who don't have the power to shatter the fantasy.

Ochako smoothed out the cheerleader skirt and looked at herself in the mirror.

She was going to blow that fantasy to fucking bits.

###

As hard as Katsuki had to fight not to be taken off the case entirely, he had to practically get on his knees and beg to get to accompany Endeavor and Ryuko on the bust Matsumoto. Endeavor, surprisingly, was the fastest to relent.

Ryuko looked content to toss his ass to the streets, insisting that he wasn't old enough to know how separate his personal feelings.

That stung, but he knew better than to fight with her.



And if anything, he was relieved that he was the one whose professionalism had been compromised by his outburst and not Ochako's.

But, in the end, Endeavor spoke with Ryuko, insisting that he would behave himself, even went as far as to tell her that it was their job to teach young heroes and that this was a part of that job; this was a lesson that Katsuki needed to learn.

Katsuki had been surprised by that, but he didn't push or press or wonder out loud; he just needed to be there. And here he was in the back of the van, cloaked by a camouflaged quirk that hid them in the night, parked outside of a huge house.

A house.

They didn't even bother to hide it- which spoke to a disturbing faith in their being untouchable.

Well, not today, fuckers.

"All right," said Endeavor, looking at the live feed on their T.V.  
"Livestream is inside the house."

They were contracting with another agency from outside of the country. The hero was relatively unknown – but remained unknown for a reason, it seemed. His quirk was perfect for undercover work. There was no need to bug him, no need for hidden cameras when he was the camera- downloading and streaming everything he sees through the airwaves and straight to them.

It was highly fucking useful.

But it also meant that the work he did best required continual covertness.

Katsuki was thankful for that right now as Livestream played the part of an obscenely wealthy pedophile, letting himself be wine and dined and led throughout the ornate mansion.

"Is this your first time here?"

Livestream turned to look at the man who addressed him, and Katsuki almost fell out of his fucking seat. "Is that..."

Endeavor nodded.

Livestream was staring at one of the richest men in Japan- Hinaki Uchida; tech entrepreneur, internationally known philanthropist, just bankrolled a whole ass children's hospital.

And that was not the end of the impressive guest list.

There was a D.A., a chief of police, and fuck it, there was even a hero that Katsuki recognized as being in the Top-Ten in North America.

No wonder this stayed hidden- these weren't just low-life thugs- these were respected pillars of society.

No wonder Matsumoto's Girls just "disappeared."

"No," said Livestream. "This my first time, but I've heard..." and while they couldn't see the face that Livestream was making, if Uchida's smirk was any indicator, he truly believed he was among friends in that moment. "Glowing reviews."

Uchida laughed and took a sip of his champagne. "Then trust me, friend, this won't be your last visit. Trying to go back to regular girls after tasting one of these is like trying to go back to beef chuck after you've had filet mignon."

Katsuki wiped his hands on his legs to relieve himself of the lethal amount of fuel pooling into his palm.

"So, you've purchased from Matsumoto a few times then?" asked Livestream.

"Of course," he said. "Best thing about them is that they take the girls back when you're done and ready for a newer one."

Livestream chuckled. "Minimal cleanup," he said. "I like that."

Uchida clinked his glass to Livestream's and continued to circulate throughout the room while Katsuki had to actively remind himself to breathe.

Katsuki had been worried about Ochako being too close- about this triggering memories and trauma, but he didn't really stop to consider (arrogant prick that he was) how it may trigger him.

And it hit him like a shit-ton of bricks listening to them talk that these assholes were talking about Ochako.

His brilliant, sweet, tough-as-nails Ochako, who loved mochi, and her

mom, and her dad, and Katsuki.

They were talking about *her* like she was disposable.

Like she wasn't human.

Like she was a thing.

And she had been made to feel that way for a lot longer than one week.

His body was buzzing with energy.

He needed to get her out of there and take some of these assholes out in the process- would the world really be anything but better if somehow any one of these villains got their face melted off?

"Dynamight..." Endeavor's tone held a firm warning.

"I'm fucking fine," he growled, keeping his eyes on the screen.

"We have to stay calm," said Ryuko. "We have to see them pay for the girls. These men all have deep pockets and a lot of power; if we have anything other than incontrovertible evidence, then they will wiggle out..." But Ryuko's eyes flashed dangerously as she took in the faces on the screen. "Slimy little shits that they are," she added, her tone low and lethal. And Katsuki wondered if she wasn't fighting the same internal battle of wanting to end some of these people right where they stand.

Livestream's video continued much of the same for the next half hour- with the heroes and detectives taking note of familiar faces and names, then the lights dimmed as if to alert theatergoers that their show was about to start.

The spectacle of it all left Katsuki thoroughly disgusted.

Livestream followed the small group into another room, the doors flanked by armed guards, each person patted down thoroughly for a third time to assure that no one had any electronics, phones, or anything else that could possibly compromise them.

Livestream was brought into his own glass booth, where he took a seat in a plush, well-cushioned chair- a small table with champagne and finger foods beside him. Katsuki was all but shaking now- swallowing back his growls and the bitter bile that threatened to rise in his throat.

If Ochako could keep it together, he sure as fuck could.

He was an angry boy. He always was. But his anger is not what mattered most here.

Ochako and all those girls mattered the most.

"Gentleman," came a voice from somewhere in the room- then immediately followed by a translation. "Thank you for joining us for today's auction where all of your wildest dreams come true. No matter your type, we assure you that you will find something to your taste here among Matsumoto's girls. On the arm of your chair, you will find a small keypad where you will be able to insert your bid, should you see something you like." A low dark chuckle. "We expect that you will find many things that you like tonight."

Katsuki exhaled slowly and tensed his fingers up one at a time, counting up and then down, at a regular pace.

*One...*

The first girl came out onto the slowly rotating stage. Katsuki knew it was their job to look and take notice, to do their due diligence, but he was still in training. He wasn't a full-fledged hero yet, and for the first time in his life, he was going to play that card as he looked away from the screen.

*Two...*

He could hear the bids being announced- each one higher than the next. The first girl goes for 43 million yen.

*Three...*

The second for 39 million yen.

*Four ...*

The third for 60 million yen.

He exhaled and counted all the way down to ten as he hears the girls get bought and sold, his eyes remaining cast down from the screen. If anyone noticed, they didn't respond.

And then...

"All right, we have eyes on Uravity."

Ochako had learned many things over the past year. She had learned how strong she was, how resilient she was, her remarkable ability to bounce back. But she had learned some other things while she was in that place, things she had fought in herself, things she had hoped to recover from entirely.

But integration meant she was knitting together all of the parts of herself- not burying them in the dirt and denying their existence. They were a part of her, and when used right, they became a part of her arsenal.

And now, in that moment, as she stood on the spinning stage, on display in front of the prying eyes of men, some disembodied voice overhead describing her physical features and her personality, it didn't sting. She knew, after this, it very well would; that she should need to process a lot of this with Shoko after, but right now, she was disconnecting- still present, eyes still roving around, but almost out of body.

It was how she protected herself before.

She had thought it had meant there was something wrong with her- but Shoko had guided her to a different understanding of herself, of the parts of herself that she had resented, parts that she thought made her less than human.

*"Your body knows how to take care of itself; blocking out your experiences, disassociating, can be helpful in certain dangerous moments. It's immediately protective, as long as you have the tools to know how to manage it."*

She jumped and shook her pom-poms and grinned and cheered- as she had been instructed.

*"Remember, be nice. The higher the bid, the richer the master, and the better you'll get treated. No one wants to throw out 60 million yen on a girl he isn't going to take care of."*

She laughed and giggled and winked and wiggled her ass. And she didn't feel the warm wash of shame.

She didn't even hear the bids. She wasn't listening. She wasn't afraid.

She knew Ryuko and Katsuki made sure that she wasn't alone here; she knew one of the bidders was a hero. She knew that she wasn't alone.

As the price for her kept rising, as bids were placed for her like she was something to be bought and sold and used, she didn't feel nausea eating away at her insides that she had expected.

This wasn't the same as it was before.

She wasn't *sexy little sister*.

Her value wasn't in the hands of the creeps trying to put a price on her.

She wasn't an object.

Even as the final bid was placed for her. She felt like herself. Like Uravity. Like Ochako Uraraka, loved by her parents. By her friends. By Katsuki.

Loved by her own self.

She was a person.

She was a hero.

She had her quirk.

She let herself be lead away from the stage toward the box seat where the top bidder was sitting. Except he wasn't a villain. She had seen his picture before she left- this hero from the States. He greeted her though as if he were, every bit the sleazy billionaire he was playing. She didn't say anything. Didn't acknowledge him. Didn't act until she was sure it was time.

She knew if he was here, that her friends were close by, waiting to make their move. She would be ready when it was time. And this time, she would make sure that all 26 of these girls got out.

She was stronger than she had ever been.

She was more powerful than she had ever been.

###

Katsuki shouldn't have been surprised by how hard it actually was to get into the mansion, but he was. He knew there were armed guards, sure, but the moment they breached the perimeter, they were like fucking aunts.

Sure, the house was big, but still- Katsuki couldn't quite figure out where the fuck they were all coming from.

But, despite it being a bit more frantic and violent than Katsuki had expected (honestly, he had expected to just roll on through and arrest every piss of shit that was here and call it a day), it wasn't hard to subdue everyone with minimal violence.

They had a fucking dragon on their team, for fucks sake- armed guards and attack dogs weren't going to do much against them. Plus, the distraction and noise let Katsuki get a few more solid kicks, punches, and explosions than maaay have been necessary, but overall, he felt like he deserved a medal for his fucking restraint- considering how murderous he was.

And he deserved a second medal for how fucking patient he was about the whole damn thing.

He carted villains onto the lawn for the cops to drag to their vans to take them for processing; he did sweeps of empty rooms beside the cops, his palms popping and crackling defensively in case they happened upon more armed villains.

When he got back downstairs, he saw Ryuko, Endeavor, and Livestream speaking intently.

"...We have Matsumoto..." he overheard that and hurried over.

"You got the asshole?"

Ryuko nodded. "Yes, he was trying to escape through an underground tunnel, but Endeavor found him before he could make it too far."

"Fucking good..." he looked at Livestream. "Where the fuck is Ocha-Uravity?"

To be fair, Livestream didn't know what the answer to that question meant to Katsuki, so when he answered casually that he lost track of her somewhere in the bust, Katsuki was sure he didn't mean to sound callous and dismissive, but that didn't stop him from almost losing his shit.

“YOU FUCKING LOST HER?!”

Livestream raised an eyebrow and looked down at him. “She’s a hero, kid,” he said- as if Katsuki didn’t know that. “I’m sure she’s fine and is just supporting the other pros and detectives. She’s fine.”

“Wasn’t that your fucking job?” snarled Katsuki. “To make sure she got out.”

“My job was to make sure she didn’t get bought by some other piece of shit,” said Livestream. “She’s fine.”

“Dynamight,” said Ryuko placatingly. “If it would make you feel better, you are welcome to sweep the mansion for Uravity and see if she needs any support.”

Katsuki didn’t have to be told twice.

###

Ochako didn’t wait this time.

This time she trusted her instincts.

This time when she noticed, she moved.

This time, she was profoundly and painfully aware of the difference a few seconds could make.

So, when she counted 25 girls recovered and in the safe hands of the pros, she knew exactly who was missing. She had said her name was Honoka. She was 14 years old, petite and delicate and frightened. She had been one of the first to go out onto the stage.

Ochako had committed every one of those girls' faces to memory because she wouldn’t lose a single one of them.

So, when Honoka was not among the girls, Ochako ran, focused and urgent and clear-headed. She barged into rooms and town halls. She jumped out the window to scan the expansive, spacious lawn, and that was when she heard the unmistakable sound of a chopper roaring to life somewhere above her.

She had not acted fast enough to save both herself and Tsu before.

She had not acted fast enough to save both herself and Li, and all of those other people who died in her arms.



She activated her quirk on herself, crouched, and launched herself into a leap, manipulating her quirk enough to let her sail through the air in an elegant arc, deactivating her quirk just as she landed, crouching momentarily to absorb the shock. She landed on top of the flat platform on the roof just as the helicopter was lifting into the air.

*She wouldn't lose her.*

*She wouldn't lose Honoka.*

*She wouldn't lose any of them.*

She quickly reactivated her quirk, this time with her now more controlled orbit move- manipulating her own gravitational field- pulling every object within an ever-increasing radius to her person.

She had hurt herself more than once doing it. Katsuki had collided so hard with her that she bit through her bottom lip and had to have stitches, and she had almost crushed herself beneath a car on another attempt.

But she was getting there. Her manipulation more exact and precise as she reached out toward the helicopter, now frozen and groaning in the air. She could hear it straining against her pull as she walked closer to it, increasing her pull enough to tug at the invisible thread between her and the helicopter dragging it down back toward the platform.

She stepped closer- gritting her teeth against the way her body felt like it was folding in on itself. It was an odd sensation, one she still wasn't entirely used to. The negation of gravity caused her nausea and dizziness. The increase made her feel like her chest was tightening and her lungs were folding in on themselves.

But she was adjusting.

She could hear screaming from the inside of the helicopter- may be warnings from the escaped criminal or cries of help or confusion from Honoka. She couldn't quite make it out. She brought the helicopter closer, only a few yards from pulling it back onto the ground- something she had to be careful about lest she punched it through the concrete, killing all of them in the process.

She couldn't hear the screaming, but she did hear the clap of gunfire.

And if she hadn't heard it, she damn well would have felt it- the explosive shot of pain that sent her crumbling forward. She quickly

deactivated her quirk, not wanting to send the helicopter in an explosive crash.

For a moment, Ochako felt dizzy, the pressure and ache in her arm odd and distinct and unlike anything else she had felt. Perhaps not the worst pain she had ever felt, but it was a unique, buzzing sensation that was soon replaced by numbness that she had come to expect after intense pain.

She tried to push herself up onto all fours, but her right arm buckled and sent her falling back. She spared a quick look down at her shoulder, where a river of blood was pumping. She had many out-of-body experiences before, and looking at a hole in her shoulder was definitely one of them, especially one that didn't hurt as bad as she was certain it would when the shock and adrenaline wore off.

Hopefully, she thought, dragging herself to her feet, it wouldn't wear off until she was done. Her run to the edge of the roof was slow and wobbly at first- the ringing in her ears and churning nausea making it hard to find her balance. But with her eyes fixed on the escaping helicopter, she found her stride as she sprinted toward the ledge, lifted a leg onto it, and kicked off hard as she negated her gravity, sending her shooting like a bullet through the air and careening not so gracefully to the helicopter.

She wouldn't lose her.

She wouldn't lose this one.

It was the least she could do for Li.

For herself.

What was the point of crawling out of that damn hole if she couldn't save just one? She reached out her hands for the opening of the helicopter and grabbed it, swinging her flailing legs into the helicopter and out of dodge of the propellers of certain death.

"What the fuck?!" Ochako looked at the man, strapped into one of the seats, holding the trembling, pale, and already bruised Honoka against him, as though she were a human shield. He extended his gun on again over Honoka's shoulder, but Ochako was close enough this time, her good hand shooting out and twisting his wrist with enough force to break it and send the gun tumbling to the ground. Ochako hurriedly kicked out of the open door of the helicopter.

“Let her go,” she screamed at the man, who she was just now recognizing.

Uchida, she thought. On all the lists of 30 under 30 to watch.

Well, now they could all watch him drag his ass to prison.

He snarled at her and held her tighter. “This is mine!” She couldn’t really hear him over the deafening sound of the spinning propellers, but she heard enough and could easily read his lips.

“It’s over,” she screamed back. “Everyone saw you! There’s nowhere for you to run! So let her go!”

He sneered at her. “There’s plenty of places for me to run,” he yelled. “Guys like me can get away with anything!”

And then, with frightful force, he shoved the unrestrained Honoka out of the helicopter. Ochako let out a feral scream and immediately moved to jump after her but was tackled back, the confined space giving her no room to maneuver away.

Ochako thrashed and kicked and roared in protest, only for that roar to turn to a scream of pain when she felt his thumb jam and dig into the bullet hole in her shoulder, lighting every nerve in her body on fire and sending her into a violent frenzy of uncontrolled pain.

She was going to lose her.

She was going to fall.

She had failed Honoka.

And then she hears the familiar explosion, loud enough to be heard over the helicopter, and a spark of hope returned to her. Reminding her once again, she wasn’t alone. They would save everyone, but it wasn’t all on her.

“DIIIE, MOTHER FUCKER!”

###

Katsuki couldn't find her, and panic was mounting inside of him. She was fine.

She had to be fine.

But he wanted to make sure- he needed to see for himself that she was intact. That she was okay. But he couldn't find her. He had just stepped outside and was met with the whirring of propeller blades and then soon after, the sound of a gunshot ringing through the air.

His eyes went up to the roof- that panic exploding in him in a ball of white of hot rage, only to be replaced by relief when he saw Ochako kicking off the ledge and launching herself at the helicopter.

She was alive.

She was alive and kicking ass.

He was in the air a few seconds later, propelling himself through the air and toward the helicopter.

Toward her.

He was a few yards away when he saw someone fall, limbs flailing and screaming, from the helicopter. It wasn't Ochako, he could tell that right away, but he was certain she was one of the victims.

He stopped his explosions so that he was falling beside her as he reached out a hand and wrapped it around her wrist. She let out a scream of panic that Katsuki did not have time for right now as he pulled her into his side, securing an arm around her waist to hold her against him. She was squirming and thrashing in a panic.

Understandable, but dammit, unhelpful!

"Relax, kid," he yelled over his own explosion. "I'm one of the good guys!"

She was still sobbing and screaming as he let off an explosion with his other hand, sending them on an uneven trajectory toward the roof of the mansion.

The landing wasn't his best, but he did only have one hand, and he was in a rush right now. He looked up at the helicopter still ascending into the air. When the girl was safe and secure, Katsuki turned to run toward the ledge himself, putting a running start behind his explosions. But he was jerked back by a small but firm grip on his wrist.

"Are you going to help her!?"

He looked down at the girl, her eyes blood-shot with panic and fear, and what Katsuki can only imagine had been a hellish few days. "The girl that helped me, you're going to go help her, right? She saved me! He had a gun, and he..." her voice pitched higher and more desperate. Katsuki grabbed her hand and gently pulled out her grasp.

"I'm gonna go check on her, kid," he said. "I imagine she has it handled, but I'm going to go make sure, okay?"

She breathed in a heavy, shaky sigh and nodded before settling back onto her knees.

"Stay here until another hero or police get here," he instructed. She nodded just as Katsuki turned to sprint off the ledge.

He was sure she had it handled.

But still- they needed each other. The two of them needed each other in ways that Katsuki still couldn't entirely wrap his head around. Her father was worried about Ochako jumping, running, loving without a safety net.

Well, he wasn't entirely sure that she needed one anymore.

But he would damn well be there if she did.

###

The pain was still radiating through her body, but the acute, sharp digging lifted as Uchida was thrown off of her. Ochako went up onto her knees in time to see Katsuki's hand gripping Uchida's face with enough force to crack his skull, his palm smoking as it smothered the man's screams.

"Katsuki, wait," she screamed, hauling herself up and looking over his shoulder at her- teeth gritted, eyes murderous, and his whole body seething with rage.

"No fucking way, Uravity," he roared. "This fucker doesn't deserve mercy!"

Ochako gripped the seat as a spell of wooziness overtook her, not helped by the helicopter's unsteady movement. "I know," she said and then gestured vaguely at Uchida's face. "Do whatever you want," she

yelled. “Just don’t mess with his face! We don’t want to make sure everything matches the footage that Livestream caught!”

Katsuki's grin twisted into something feral and wicked, and it did something to her that she didn't quite have time to process on account of the bullet in her shoulder.

She moved to the pilot and barked out orders to the pale, shaking man to land the helicopter unless he wanted his face melted off. He did not, in fact, want that and immediately moved to head back to the roof. From where she was, she could already see Endeavor and Ryuko and a swarm of officers.

Then upon getting a little closer, she could see Honoka, a blanket draped over her shoulders, but alive. Katsuki had shown up just in time. After Katsuki “restrained” Uchida, giving in once or twice to his more base desires for vengeance, something that Ochako was not in a time or space to scold him for, not while her arm felt like a million pounds of painful, deadweight- little jolts of pain, like electrical signals attempting to fire off, shot through from her shoulder to the tips of her fingers.

When they landed back on the roof, officers warmed toward them, apprehending Uchida while Katsuki knelt in front of her in the helicopter. She sighed under the pleasant warmth of his hands on her knees, moving soothingly up and down her thighs, which she only noticed briefly through her clouded senses how naked her legs were right now due to the skirt.

“Hey, Ochako,” he said, his voice soft and coaxing. “Can you walk?”

She shook her head as it fell heavily into her own shoulder.

“Too tired...” she slurred.

It seemed that adrenaline had passed with a crash, and now her body wasn’t listening to her urging to move.

“I know, Cheeks,” he said, squeezing her good hand. “You busted your ass, and you’re almost done, but you’re bleeding a shit ton, so we need to get you out of here.”

She nodded and was vaguely aware of his palm holding her cheek and gently patting her back into consciousness, and then she was sure she heard him yelling overhead. But it was his voice, so she didn’t shrink from it.

She felt his forehead against hers and his lips on hers briefly.

"We got you, Ochako," he said. "I'm right here. You're with me."

She was with him.

He was with her.

They were both safe.

And she didn't cry or scream or shrink away when she felt hands on her, moving her out of the helicopter and onto a stretcher.

Because she could hear him close to her ear.

"You were a fucking badass, Cheeks," he said.

She didn't know why but she felt a sudden overwhelming surge of emotion- maybe it was shock, or blood loss, or a near-death experience, but she suddenly was overwhelmed with love for Katsuki.

"You saved Honoka," she whispered. "Thank you."

"Yeah," he said. "We saved everyone, Ochako. Every last one of them."

She hummed and didn't even fight or resist when she felt the needle prick of something in her arm. She wasn't scared this time. She wasn't frantic.

And even though she was leaving in much of the same way she had from that place, covered in blood, exhausted, and a little worse for the wear, this time she was leaving a field of victory; this time Katsuki was beside her.

But, what was the same as last time, even if she hadn't known it then- she was leaving as a fucking warrior.

That sure as hell hadn't changed.

###

"OCHAKO!"

Mina threw herself at Ochako, carefully avoiding her bandaged arm but still embracing her with all of the enthusiasm that she could safely give her.

“You’re alive!”

Ochako laughed and patted her back as she scooted over in the bed and pulled the blanket back so Mina could cuddle in beside her, resting her head on her shoulder.

“Of course I am,” she said, “I...”

Deku was on her next as Shoto sat at the edge of the bed and grabbed her ankle, a gesture that almost made her heart explode out of her chest. He wasn’t big on hugs, but he wanted to be near her. Like a cat feigning disinterest while also wanting to sit close enough to make certain their person was still there.

She was honored to be one of his people, and she was glad he was one of hers.

Kirishima sat at the foot of the bed on the other side.

“You’re the first of us to get shot, Ochako,” he exclaimed.  
“Congratulations! You’ll have a manly scar!”

She rolled her eyes. “I would get a scar from something as lame as a gun,” she grouched. “Not even a badass quirk, but literally the stupidest thing on the planet!” She sighed and shrugged dramatically. “Oh well!”

“How long will your recovery be?” asked Deku, leaning in close to her wrapped shoulder as if it would give him any indication.

“Not long,” she said. “The surgery went great, and they got the thing out, and they said with quirk acceleration I should be good to go home by the weekend!”

“That’s great,” exclaimed Deku. “Just in time for finals!”

Ochako groaned and rubbed her face. “Oh yeah,” she said. “I forgot!”

“Yeah,” said Kirishima. “Too busy being a badass, I’m sure Aizawa will...” They all turned and looked at him incredulously. “Sorry,” he said, shaking his head. “Yeah, don’t know what I was thinking. Remember, when we were all back in class again a week after Shigaraki almost killed us.” He clutched his chest dramatically. “That man has no mercy.”

They spent the next half hour joking and laughing- the way they



would at the dorms. Katsuki was there too but leaned up against the wall away from the throngs of extras, his arms crossed petulantly and only contributing when forced to.

Despite the stress of the last week, the moments of fear and dread, there were no tears on this visit- no recoiling, no shrinking away from each other.

When they said their goodbyes, they hugged her without fear, and she returned them without reluctance. These were people, her family, and she was nothing but eager to get out of this bed and back to them.

Kirishima told her he couldn't wait to spar with her when she got back.

Deku said he wanted to show her some ideas he got for her support equipment after she had told him about the mission and what it had entailed.

Mina kissed her on the cheek and told her she hoped that she would be ready for the post-finals pre-graduation dance party.

Shoto told her he had ordered her some exotic new mochi flavors he was eager for her to try.

She loved them all so much, and she couldn't wait to get back to them.

"What the fucks got you grinning all dopy?"

When they were gone, Katsuki finally dragged himself from the wall of her room and toward her bed, shrugging his backpack off of his shoulder before he sat down beside her on the bed.

She gave him a simpering smile and doe-eyed blinks. "You're such a sweet-talker, Katsuki."

"Tch..." he lugged his backpack into his lap and unzipped it, fishing around inside. "Damn fucking straight, I am!"

She snuggled up beside him and peeked into his bag. "Did you bring me something?!"

"Yuup," he said, pulling a big ass binder out of the bag and dropping it between them.

She groaned and let her head fall back onto her pillow, and covered

her face. “Katsukiiii,” she whined. “I’m tired!”

“Tough tits,” he said, as her eyes fell disdainfully on the binder cover labeled “*Die Finals!*” .

“I got shot,” she protested.

“And I got impaled by black whip,” he shot back. “Guess who still passed their finals that year?!”

She glared at him. “Is that card ever gonna expire?”

“Nope,” he said, throwing the binder open between their two laps. “And your little expedition into the underbelly of criminal activity ain’t an excuse to slack off! Now come on,” he urged, tapping the first page. “We gotta get you caught up!”

She pouted but looked down at the sheet he was pointing out. “Fiine,” she groaned, resting her chin in her hands. He rolled her eyes beside her and nudged her gently.

“I also brought you snacks,” he said, reaching into his bag and pulling out her favorite, junk-food, sugary-sweetie pastry.

She let out a delighted squeal and accepted his offering, munching happily as they started their study session. She made it about thirty minutes before her head lulled onto his shoulder. And she figured that meant it was only a few minutes before she fell asleep.

And he would let her sleep.

And then he would help her catch up later.

She knew, deep in her body and her soul and her bones, that he always would catch her when she needed it.

## Chapter End Notes

okay you'll notice i have two epilogues! BUT they are essentially the same. The first epilogue is one with smut. Because of the nature of the story though i wanted to provide an alternative with

more implied smut- just in case that's triggering or hard for anyone to read.

Obviously, Ochako reclaiming her body is a big part of this story so i didn't feel like it was inappropriate to use at the end, BUT because I hadn't planned on smut from the beginning and didn't include that in the tags (adding now) I wanted to provide an alternative epilogue. The sex is implied in the second version of the epilogue.

But both have the same last POV of Ochako :)

# Epilogue: Her Legacy

## Chapter Summary

This is the epilogue WITH smut- if you don't want to read smut then please head over to the next epilogue where it is implied/ talked about BUT not in detail :)

“How’s that?”

“Tha-at’s...” she let out a small, breathy moan. “G-good,” she said. “That’s...really good.”

Katsuki looked up her body to her face- that body that he loved so much and had only come to love more and more over the last year, through their slow, gradual exploration. During that time, they had learned to communicate, to speak clearly.

Important in any relationship, he knew.

Especially important for them.

He knew how to listen to her words, but also to her body, to her breathing, to the way her grip softened or tightened in his hair or on his shoulder, or the way her body tensed or gave way to the weight of his own, sometimes responding before she even has the words to speak; by the way her hand either moved to tug him close or push him away.

He had gotten good at it, but that didn’t mean that there had not been moments of uncertainty and failure and stumbling along the way. Just a few weeks ago, they had tried to have sex for the first time, and it had been disastrous.

Sure, Ochako knew in her head all the right things about sex.

That it wasn’t bad.

That it wasn’t dirty.

That it was something she wanted.

She knew- mentally- that virginity was a construct and that Katsuki only gave a shit in as far as it mattered to her. She knew that functionally there wasn’t a whole lot of difference between how far

they had gone physically and where she wanted to go. But still, it was mental and physical and emotional for her- something she felt in her body and soul and bones, a hurdle that sent her into cold sweats.

But she had wanted to try.

She had said she was okay.

His instincts had told him that she wasn't. But he was always torn on that front, not knowing if he was projecting his own worries and uncertainties onto her. He wanted to respect her desire and not infantilize her, but also recognize that this whole thing was swirly with confusion for her. But still- his instincts were good- and he should have listened to them on their first attempt.

She was saying yes, but as soon as he was inside of her- he saw and felt the shift in her. Her eyes screwed shut, her lip shook, and she sunk almost passive and non-resistant beneath him.

And he felt like shit for a good 24 hours.

It had been a bad night then, a night of her apologizing to him over and over. A night of him feeling like shit because she felt like she had to apologize, and a part of him feeling like shit because he was mad that he had been in the situation at all when she had insisted that she was okay.

He didn't want to be mad at her.

But it was hard to get the image of her just wholly shutting down out of his head.

But they figured it out.

Like they always did.

Because he didn't run from her, and she didn't run from him.

Their second attempt was much better- though similarly disrupted. They had both been into it, even as he pushed inside of her- she clung to him in what was a decidedly enthusiastic grip and whispered his name in what way that turned him into putty in her hands.

But about 30 seconds in, something inexplicably triggered. Her hands found his shoulders, and she shook her head. "I'm sorry," she choked out as he pushed off of her. She cried a lot that night too, but he held

her and told her it was okay.

That they could try as many times as she needed. He reminded her that it didn't matter if he or she was five seconds from finishing- if she needed to stop, then they would stop- always. And that assurance and carried them through a few more fumbling attempts.

But tonight, she suggested starting with something a little different.

And he had been pathetically eager to oblige. He was still anxious about initiating anything new- content to let her decide when to make each new step. So, she when she asked, adorably, her fucking perfect cheeks flushed pink, if he maybe he would want to go down on her first and see if that helped her relax- he had to consciously lower the decibel and intensity of his, "fuck yes!"

...Something she was a little less shy about as she dug her fingers into his hair, delighting him with her own declaration, finding her surprisingly verbal for this encounter. It was fine. They got their own apartment after graduating so she could be as loud as she wanted. He sure as fuck wasn't complaining about her enthusiasm.

It was fucking sexy as hell.

He peered back up at her from his position between her legs and found her beautiful, perfect, and wholly surrendered to the sensation he was giving her- the sensation she trusted him to give her- the thought alone made him moan against her, and he felt her toes curl against him in response.

"Katsuki," she whimpered, and that was about enough to end him right then and there.

"Fuuck," she moaned into the back of her hand as her gorgeous thighs clenched around his head. "Yes," she sighed, arching off of the bed enthusiastically, rolling her hips against his face, letting him know that he should keep doing what he was doing. His tongue, his lips, his jaw all working in tandem, coaxing the coiled tension out of her in bursts of pleasure that sputtered over his tongue.

He slowed his movements from less rapid and direct to blunt and long as her body sunk back onto the mattress. He rested his cheek on her thigh and looked back up at her. He loved this look on her face, though it had never looked quite this good- quite this complete.

He climbed back up the length of her body, dropping affectionate

kisses along the way before capturing her cheek in a soft bite that made her giggle, and he always liked that. After being with Ochako, he wondered that laughing and giggling could be such a turn-on.

He would have assumed, before her, that it would be a mood-killer, but it was the opposite.

He liked seeing her happy.

“Katsuki,” she whispered into his shoulder. He went up onto his hands to look down at her. “Maybe we should try with me on top?”

His brain almost short-circuited, and he was amazed that his body even got the message to nod. But he did. She nodded and moved to sit up, leaving a hurried kiss on his forehead before they switched places, so she was sitting on his thighs. She sat there for a moment, just exploring his body, tracing the scars across his arms, his side, his chest. 3rd year had a lot of close class for the both of them, and they both had the scars to prove it.

Two months out of graduation had been similarly busy though surprisingly less dangerous so far as sidekicks. But they both knew that wouldn’t last forever. She bent over him, kissing his neck in that tender, careful way that he never wanted to take for granted.

While they had progressed past keeping it exclusively soft kisses and questioning touches- when she had flat out told him she liked it when he held her a little tighter, when he pulled at her hair, when his teeth scraped her skin; still, she always included some kiss like that.

And, still, it made him feel all fucking soft and warm like some kind of sap.

Because she loves him so fucking much.

And she trusts him with so fucking much as she adjusted herself over him and slid down onto him at an achingly perfect pace. His hands tightened their grip on her hips as she let out a stuttered inhale. She didn’t really need him to stabilize her, but, well, he liked touching her.

He always wanted to touch her.

“How...is...is that good?” she asked, her eyes shut and her fingers digging into his chest. His body was shaking at the sensation of her wrapped around him- warm and soft and gorgeous.

“Fuck yes,” he growled, his head falling back on the pillow. “Just...tell me if you want me to move.”

She nodded as she began shifting and rolling her hips experimentally in excruciatingly teasing movements, lifting herself up slowly and then falling slowly back down.

His hands moved to grip at her thighs, straining to keep his body still- which was hard to do because her own expression had changed from experimental and wondering to something much more lust-filled, her brow knitted, and her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

She let herself fall over him as she pressed an open mouth kiss to his lips. “I’m good, Katsuki,” she said. “Please move.” She sat back up, her hands covering his and capturing his thick wrists in her hands. She guided them up her body to her neck and then nuzzled his hand into her cheek, pressing a small kiss to his palm as she began to move again, this time with more certainty and clarity.

She held his hand to her face, her tongue darting out against his thumb as it rested on her bottom lip.

It was...

Everything.

Blinding.

Too much and not enough.

His eyes screwed shut because he was certain if he looked at her from this angle, he would last a whole 5 seconds more. But his eyes snapped open when he felt moisture on his hand.

“Ochako,” he rasped, looking up at her and finding her eyes shining brightly with tears. “What’s wrong?”

She shook her head and smiled into his hand. “I’m good,” she assured him. “I’m better than good.” A moan escaped her lips as she continued to rock against him, balancing herself on his chest. “It...it feels really good, Katsuki.”

She said it almost like a question- like something she wasn’t sure of or wasn’t sure if she could trust it.

She bent once again over him, pressing her forehead to his, never



breaking the rhythmic movement of her hips. He could feel her breathing on his skin, sticky and soft and more than he could ever dream of. His palm pressed into the small of her back, encouraging her.

“I love you,” he whispered, kissing her closed eyes. “I fucking love you so much.”

She smiled into him as she sped up, shifting and moving deeper until she found a spot that made the most gorgeous sound pour out of her lips.

“Katsuki,” she whispered. “I love you too. I love you so much.”

Her breathing became erratic as she moved more and more from slow, languid movements to something much more frantic and desperate. She was still crying; he could feel the tears on his own cheek as they slid off of hers. . His own hips snapped up to meet her in controlled thrusts as he continued to kiss her face, holding her preciously to him.

He could hold her forever.

Wanted to hold her forever.

Wanted to feel this forever.

She let out a shocked gasp against him, her eyes widening and then fluttering wildly as she clenched around him.

“Fuuck,” he gasped, the feeling of her coming undone apparently all he needed to fall over the edge himself. She collapsed, sticky and heaving into the waiting mattress of his chest, naturally falling into her favorite spot, ear against his heart, listening intently to the rhythm of his breathing, her hot tears now mingling with the sweat of his chest.

One hand held her at the small of her back while the other cupped the back of her head, pressing her into him as her gentle sniffles and her labored breathing filled the empty space around them.

He knew it was about more than sex.

About more than an orgasm.

About more than him.

About more than them.

This moment was bigger than that.

It was about her- all that she had fought for- all the sacrifice and the loss and the work. All the uncertainty about whether or not this moment would ever happen for her: it was about how she had come back over and over and over again.

About how much had been taken from her and all that she was claiming as her own.

Her body.

Her desire.

Her pleasure.

Her autonomy.

Her strength.

Her power.

Every day she took it back in her own Ochako way- every day, he got to be by her side- be her partner- while she did.

He kissed the top of her head.

And she nuzzled closer, her fingers dancing lightly over the skin of his shoulder, up and down his arms, over his chest, and dipping into the hollow of his throat.

"Thank-you, Katsuki," she whispered, a warm smile curling across her lips.

"For the orgasm?" he asked, in her hair. "Yeah, no problem." He reached down to pull their comforter up over both of them as she cuddled closer.

"For everything," she murmured. "For loving me so well."

His breath caught in his throat, as it often did in the face of her unabashed gratitude.

God, he loved her so much.

He was good at almost everything he did- he wanted to be the best at everything he did. He was confident he could be the best at everything

if he only tried hard enough.

But loving her- loving someone so much he can't even see straight- sometimes that scared the shit out of him.

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Ochako remembered a time when she thought that her legacy would be the girl who died in a cage.

Or the girl who burned out and would never be a hero after a trauma she wouldn't really ever recover from.

Or the girl who passed out in the middle of her testimony in a court of law.

When she was younger, she never could have imagined what was coming. All the pain and the loss and the fear and the suffering that was on its way. After it all had happened, she couldn't imagine anything good ever happening to her again.

It had been impossible to believe that what *was* would not always *be* .

If she could tell herself what was coming even after that storm, if she could go back and assure that Ochako who was numb and bleeding in a cage that so much more was on the way if she would only hold on- she doubted very much that she would have believed it.

She doubted that she would have believed how much love the world would pay her back and how much more she could pour into it.

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cranky blonde who threw his notes at her in that hospital bed. She had no idea that a kiss from that man would melt her- that she would feel it head to toe- that he would turn her world upside down with just a touch. She had no idea that she would ever want to touch or be touched like that again.

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And it was a legacy she would crawl out of that hole for...

Over and over and over again.

# Epilogue: Her Legacy

## Chapter Summary

The version of the epilogue without smut :) but they do talk about it!

Also just a reminder because I don't know how it updates or alerts On Ao3 but I posted a new chapter and the two versions of the epilogue at once! So chapter 25 is the latest chapter + the epilogues! So go back to 25 if you haven't read it yet :)

When all was said and done, and Ochako was collapsed onto his chest, her tears mixing with his sweat and with her own, it took him a while to be able to form words again.

“How was that?”

She took a few more deep breathes before she looked up at him from where she was nestled, her big brown eyes still shining with emotion. “It was...It was really good.” She said it almost like she didn't trust it like it was still a question with an answer she didn't quite believe yet.

Katsuki looked down at her, his hands still moving up and down her body, that body that he loved so much and had only come to love more and moreover the last year, through their slow, gradual exploration. During that time, they had learned to communicate, to speak clearly.

Important in any relationship, he knew.

Especially important for them.

He knew how to listen to her words, but also to her body, to her breathing, to the way her grip softened or tightened in his hair or on his shoulder, or the way her body tensed or gave way to the weight of his own, sometimes responding before she even has the words to speak; by the way her hand either moved to tug him close or push him away.

He had gotten good at it, but that didn't mean that there had not been moments of uncertainty and failure and stumbling along the way. Just a few weeks ago, they had tried to have sex for the first time, and it had been disastrous.

Sure, Ochako knew in her head all the right things about sex.

That wasn't bad.

That it wasn't dirty.

That it was something she wanted.

She knew- mentally- that virginity was a construct and that Katsuki only gave a shit in as far as it mattered to her. She knew that functionally there wasn't a whole lot of difference between how far they had gone and where she wanted to go. But still, it was mental and physical and emotional for her- something she felt in her body and soul and bones, a hurdle that sent her into cold sweats.

But she had wanted to try.

She had said she was okay.

His instincts had told him that she wasn't. But he was always torn on that front, not knowing if he was projecting his own worries and uncertainties onto her. He wanted to respect her desire and not infantilize her, but also recognize that this whole thing was swirly with confusion for her. But still- his instincts were good- and he should have listened to them on their first attempt.

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They had started slow, warming her up and working her up until her body was at ease, resting in the assurance that it was safe.

Safe in this place.

Safe with him.

She had started crying half-way through, and that had worried him at first, sent him almost spinning into a panic before she stopped him, her fingers pressed to his bottom lip, her face and sounds leaving no hint that those were anything except good tears.

Happy tears.

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